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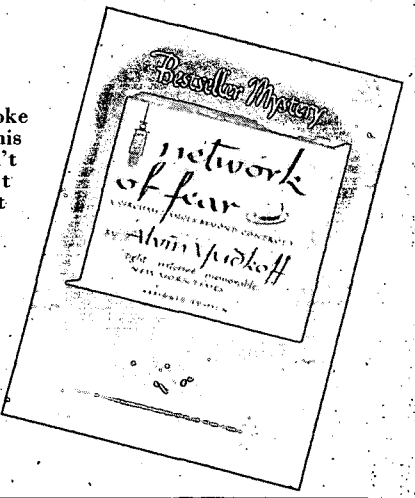

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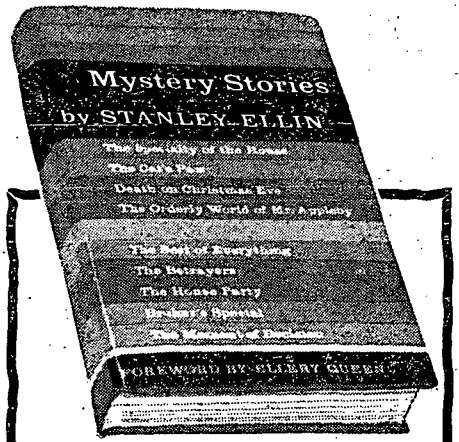

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SPECIAL AWARD OF MERIT

The simple truth is, Stanley Ellin has won every type of 'tec award that EQMM has devised in fifteen years of publication. Mr. Ellin's very first story — the now classic "The Specialty of the House" — won the Special Prize for the Best "First Story" in our Third Annual Contest. That was back in 1947. The next year Mr. Ellin won a Third Prize. In the next five years he won five Second Prizes in a row. That brought Mr. Ellin to our Tenth Annual Contest — in 1954 — and this time he won the highest award EQMM can give any author in any year: his story, "The Moment of Decision," was awarded First Prize as the best of the year.

Then last year — in our Eleventh Annual Contest — Stanley Ellin, Magellan-like, circumnavigated the EQMM criminological globe. His newest story, "The Blessington Method," won the Special Award of Merit, and thus Mr. Ellin performed the 'tec hat trick.

It seems clear now that EQMM must create a new world for Stanley Ellin to conquer. We shall try our best . . .

In Mr. Ellin's latest story you will meet Mr. Treadwell, 47 years old, in excellent health, and quite prosperous, who comes face to face with a horrifying contemporary problem — and with the grandiose solution offered by Mr. Treadwell's stout visitor. We guarantee you will find "The Blessington Method" one of Mr. Ellin's most impressive — and provocative — stories. And after you have read Mr. Ellin's newest "shocker" — after, *mind you! — we suggest that you read carefully the fifth of The Ten Commandments, the one beginning "Honour thy father and thy mother . . ."*

THE BLESSINGTON METHOD

by STANLEY ELLIN

MR. TREADWELL WAS A SMALL, likeable man who worked for a prosperous company in New York City, and whose position with the company entitled him to an office of his own. Late one afternoon of a fine day in June a visitor entered this office. The visitor was stout, well-dressed, and imposing. His complexion was smooth and pink, his small, near-sighted eyes shone cheerfully behind heavy, horn-rimmed eyeglasses.

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"My name," he said, after laying aside a bulky portfolio and shaking Mr. Treadwell's hand with a crushing grip, "is Bunce, and I am a representative of the Society for Gerontology. I am here to help you with your problem, Mr. Treadwell."

Mr. Treadwell sighed. "Since you are a total stranger to me, my friend," he said, "and since I have never heard of the outfit you claim to represent, and, above all, since I have no problem which could possibly concern you, I am sorry to say that I am not in the market for whatever you are peddling. Now, if you don't mind —"

"Mind?" said Bunce. "Of course, I mind. The Society for Gerontology does not try to sell anything to anybody, Mr. Treadwell. Its interests are purely philanthropic. It examines case histories, draws up reports, works toward the solution of one of the most tragic situations we face in modern society."

"Which is?"

"That should have been made obvious by the title of the organization, Mr. Treadwell. Gerontology is the study of old age and the problems concerning it. Do not confuse it with geriatrics, please. Geriatrics is concerned with the diseases of old age. Gerontology deals with old age as the problem itself."

"I'll try to keep that in mind," Mr. Treadwell said impatiently. "Meanwhile, I suppose, a small donation is in order? Five dollars, say?"

"No, no, Mr. Treadwell, not a penny, not a red cent. I quite understand that this is the traditional way of dealing with various philanthropic organizations, but the Society for Gerontology works in a different way entirely. Our objective is to help you with your problem first. Only then would we feel we have the right to make any claim on you."

"Fine," said Mr. Treadwell more amiably. "That leaves us all even. I have no problem, so you get no donation. Unless you'd rather reconsider?"

"Reconsider?" said Bunce in a pained voice. "It is you, Mr. Treadwell, and not I who must reconsider. Some of the most pitiful cases the Society deals with are those of people who have long refused to recognize or admit their problem. I have worked months on your case, Mr. Treadwell. I never dreamed you would fall into that category."

Mr. Treadwell took a deep breath. "Would you mind telling me just what you mean by that nonsense about working on my case? I was never a case for any damned society or organization in the book!"

It was the work of a moment for Bunce to whip open his portfolio and extract several sheets of paper from it. "If you will bear with me," he said, "I should like to sum up the gist of these reports. You are forty-seven years old and in excellent health. You own a home in East Sconsett, Long Island, on which there are nine years of mortgage payments still due, and you also own a late-model car on which eighteen monthly payments are yet to be made. However, due

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to an excellent salary you are in prosperous circumstances. Am I correct?"

"As correct as the credit agency which gave you that report." said Mr. Treadwell.

Bunce chose to overlook this. "We will now come to the point, You have been happily married for twenty-three years, and have one daughter who was married last year and now lives with her husband in Chicago. Upon her departure from your home your father-in-law, a widower and somewhat crotchety gentleman, moved into the house and now resides with you and your wife."

Bunce's voice dropped to a low, impressive note. "He is seventy-two years old, and, outside of a touch of bursitis in his right shoulder, admits to exceptional health for his age. He has stated on several occasions that he hopes to live another twenty years, and according to actuarial statistics which my Society has on file *he has every chance of achieving this*. Now do you understand, Mr. Treadwell?"

It took a long time for the answer to come. "Yes," said Mr. Treadwell at last, almost in a whisper. "Now I understand."

"Good," said Bunce sympathetically. "Very good. The first step is always a hard one — the admission that there *is* a problem hovering over you, clouding every day that passes. Nor is there any need to ask why you make efforts to conceal it even from yourself. You wish to spare Mrs. Treadwell your unhappiness, don't you?"

Mr. Treadwell nodded.

"Would it make you feel better," asked Bunce, "if I told you that Mrs. Treadwell shared your own feelings? That she, too, feels her father's presence in her home as a burden which grows heavier each day?"

"But she can't!" said Mr. Treadwell in dismay. "She was the one who wanted him to live with us in the first place, after Sylvia got married, and we had a spare room. She pointed out how much he had done for us when we first got started, and how easy he was to get along with, and how little expense it would be — it was she who sold me on the idea. I can't believe she didn't mean it!"

"Of course, she meant it. She knew all the traditional emotions at the thought of her old father living alone somewhere, and offered all the traditional arguments on his behalf, and was sincere every moment. The trap she led you both into was the pitfall that awaits anyone who indulges in murky, sentimental thinking. Yes, indeed, I'm sometimes inclined to believe that Eve ate the apple just to make the serpent happy," said Bunce, and shook his head grimly at the thought.

"Poor Carol," groaned Mr. Treadwell. "If I had only known that she felt as miserable about this as I did —"

"Yes?" said Bunce. "What would you have done?"

Mr. Treadwell frowned. "I don't know. But there must have been something we could have figured out if we put our heads together."

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"What?" Bunce asked. "Drive the man out of the house?"

"Oh, I don't mean exactly like that."

"What then?" persisted Bunce. "Send him to an institution? There are some extremely luxurious institutions for the purpose. You'd have to consider one of them, since he could not possibly be regarded as a charity case; nor, for that matter, could I imagine him taking kindly to the idea of going to a public institution."

"Who would?" said Mr. Treadwell. "And as for the expensive kind, well, I did look into the idea once, but when I found out what they'd cost I knew it was out. It would take a fortune."

"Perhaps," suggested Bunce, "he could be given an apartment of his own — a small, inexpensive place with someone to take care of him."

"As it happens, that's what he moved out of to come live with us. And on that business of someone taking care of him — you'd never believe what it costs. That is, even allowing we could find someone to suit him."

"Right!" Bunce said, and struck the desk sharply with his fist. "Right in every respect, Mr. Treadwell."

Mr. Treadwell looked at him angrily. "What do you mean — right? I had the idea you wanted to help me with this business, but you haven't come up with a thing yet. On top of that you make it sound as if we're making great progress."

"We are, Mr. Treadwell, we are. Although you weren't aware of it we have just completed the second step to your solution. The first step was the admission that there was a problem; the second step was the realization that no matter which way you turn there seems to be no logical or practical solution to the problem. In this way you are not only witnessing, you are actually participating in the marvelous operation of The Blessington Method which, in the end, places the one possible solution squarely in your hands."

"The Blessington Method?"

"Forgive me," said Bunce. "In my enthusiasm I used a term not yet in scientific vogue. I must explain, therefore, that The Blessington Method is the term my co-workers at the Society for Gerontology have given to its course of procedure. It is so titled in honor of J. G. Blessington, the Society's founder, and one of the great men of our era. He has not achieved his proper acclaim yet, but he will. Mark my words, Mr. Treadwell, some day his name will resound louder than that of Malthus."

"Funny I never heard of him," reflected Mr. Treadwell. "Usually I keep up with the newspapers. And another thing," he added, eyeing Bunce narrowly, "we never did get around to clearing up just how you happened to list me as one of your cases, and how you managed to turn up so much about me."

Bunce laughed delightedly. "It does sound mysterious when you put it like that, doesn't it? Well, there's really no mystery to it at all. You see, Mr. Treadwell, the Society has hun-

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dreds of investigators scouting this great land of ours from coast to coast, although the public at large is not aware of this. It is against the rules of the Society for any employee to reveal that he is a professional investigator — he would immediately lose effectiveness.

"Nor do these investigators start off with some specific person as their subject. Their interest lies in *any* aged person who is willing to talk about himself, and you would be astonished at how garrulous most aged people are about their most intimate affairs. That is, of course, as long as they are among strangers.

"These subjects are met at random on park benches, in saloons, in libraries — in any place conducive to comfort and conversation. The investigator befriends the subjects, draws them out — seeks, especially, to learn all he can about the younger people on whom they are dependent."

"You mean," said Mr. Treadwell with growing interest, "the people who support them."

"No, no," said Bunce. "You are making the common error of equating *dependence* and *finances*. In many cases, of course, there is a financial dependence, but that is a minor part of the picture. The important factor is that there is always an *emotional* dependence. Even where a physical distance may separate the older person from the younger, that emotional dependence is always present. It is like a current passing between them. The younger person by the mere realization that the aged exist is burdened by guilt and anger. It was his personal experience with this tragic dilemma of our times that led J. G. Blessington to his great work."

"In other words," said Mr. Treadwell, "you mean that even if the old man were not living with us, things would be just as bad for Carol and me?"

"You seem to doubt that, Mr. Treadwell. But tell me, what makes things bad for you now, to use your own phrase?"

Mr. Treadwell thought this over. "Well," he said, "I suppose it's just a case of having a third person around all the time. It gets on your nerves after a while."

"But your daughter lived as a third person in your home for over twenty years," pointed out Bunce. "Yet, I am sure you didn't have the same reaction to her."

"But that's different," Mr. Treadwell protested. "You can have fun with a kid; play with her, watch her growing up —"

"Stop right there!" said Bunce. "Now you are hitting the mark. All the years your daughter lived with you you could take pleasure in watching her grow, flower like an exciting plant, take form as an adult being. But the old man in your house can only wither and decline now, and watching that process casts a shadow on your life. Isn't that the case?"

"I suppose it is."

"In that case, do you suppose it would make any difference if he lived

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elsewhere? Would you be any the less aware that he was withering and declining and looking wistfully in your direction from a distance?"

"Of course not. Carol probably wouldn't sleep half the night worrying about him, and I'd have him on my mind all the time because of her. That's perfectly natural, isn't it?"

"It is, indeed, and, I am pleased to say, your recognition of that completes the third step of The Blessington Method. You now realize that it is not the *presence* of the aged subject which creates the problem, but his *existence*."

Mr. Treadwell pursed his lips thoughtfully. "I don't like the sound of that."

"Why not? It merely states the fact, doesn't it?"

"Maybe it does. But there's something about it that leaves a bad taste in the mouth. It's like saying that the only way Carol and I can have our troubles settled is by the old man's dying."

"Yes," Bunce said gravely, "it is like saying that."

"Well, I don't like it — not one bit. Thinking you'd like to see somebody dead can make you feel pretty mean, and as far as I know it's never killed anybody yet."

Bunce smiled. "Hasn't it?" he said gently.

He and Mr. Treadwell studied each other in silence. Then Mr. Treadwell pulled a handkerchief from his pocket with nerveless fingers and patted his forehead with it.

"You," he said with deliberation, "are either a lunatic or a practical joker. Either way, I'd like you to clear out of here. That's fair warning."

Bunce's face was all sympathetic concern. "Mr. Treadwell," he cried, "don't you realize you were on the verge of the fourth step? Don't you see how close you were to your solution?"

Mr. Treadwell pointed to the door. "Out — before I call the police."

The expression on Bunce's face changed from concern to disgust. "Oh, come, Mr. Treadwell, you don't believe anybody would pay attention to whatever garbled and incredible story you'd concoct out of this. Please think it over carefully before you do anything rash, now or later. If the exact nature of our talk were even mentioned, you would be the only one to suffer, believe me. Meanwhile, I'll leave you my card. Anytime you wish to call on me I will be ready to serve you."

"And why should I ever want to call on you?" demanded the white-faced Mr. Treadwell.

"There are various reasons," said Bunce, "but one above all." He gathered his belongings and moved to the door. "Consider, Mr. Treadwell: anyone who has mounted the first three steps of The Blessington Method inevitably mounts the fourth. You have made remarkable progress in a short time, Mr. Treadwell — you should be calling soon."

"I'll see you in hell first," said Mr. Treadwell.

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Despite this parting shot, the time that followed was a bad one for Mr. Treadwell. The trouble was that having been introduced to The Blessington Method he couldn't seem to get it out of his mind. It incited thoughts that he had to keep thrusting away with an effort, and it certainly colored his relationship with his father-in-law in an unpleasant way.

Never before had the old man seemed so obtrusive, so much in the way, and so capable of always doing or saying the thing most calculated to stir annoyance. It especially outraged Mr. Treadwell to think of this intruder in his home babbling his private affairs to perfect strangers, eagerly spilling out details of his family life to paid investigators who were only out to make trouble. And, to Mr. Treadwell in his heated state of mind, the fact that the investigators could not be identified as such did not serve as any excuse.

Within very few days Mr. Treadwell, who prided himself on being a sane and level-headed businessman, had to admit he was in a bad way. He began to see evidences of a fantastic conspiracy on every hand. He could visualize hundreds — no, thousands — of Bunces swarming into offices just like his all over the country. He could feel cold sweat starting on his forehead at the thought.

But, he told himself, the whole thing was *too* fantastic. He could prove this to himself by merely reviewing his discussion with Bunce, and so he did, dozens of times. After all, it was no more than an objective look at a social problem. Had anything been said that a *really* intelligent man should shy away from? Not at all. If he had drawn some shocking inferences, it was because the ideas were already in his mind looking for an outlet.

On the other hand —

It was with a vast relief that Mr. Treadwell finally decided to pay a visit to the Society for Gerontology. He knew what he would find there: a dingy room or two, a couple of underpaid clerical workers, the musty odor of a piddling charity operation — all of which would restore matters to their proper perspective again. He went so strongly imbued with this picture that he almost walked past the gigantic glass and aluminum tower which was the address of the Society, rode its softly humming elevator in confusion, and emerged in the anteroom of the Main Office in a daze.

And it was still in a daze that he was ushered through a vast and seemingly endless labyrinth of rooms by a sleek, long-legged young woman, and saw, as he passed, hosts of other young women, no less sleek and long-legged, multitudes of brisk, square-shouldered young men, rows of streamlined machinery clicking and chuckling in electronic glee, mountains of stainless-steel card indexes, and, over all, the bland reflection of modern indirect lighting on plastic and metal — until finally he was led into the presence of Bunce himself, and the door closed behind him.

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"Impressive, isn't it?" said Bunce, obviously relishing the sight of Mr. Treadwell's stupefaction.

"Impressive?" croaked Mr. Treadwell hoarsely. "Why, I've never seen anything like it. It's a ten-million-dollar outfit!"

"And why not? Science is working day and night like some Frankenstein, Mr. Treadwell, to increase longevity past all sane limits. There are fourteen million people over sixty-five in this country right now. In twenty years their number will be increased to twenty-one million. Beyond that no one can even estimate what the figures will rise to!

"But the one bright note is that each of these aged people is surrounded by many young donors or potential donors to our Society. As the tide rises higher, we, too, flourish and grow stronger to withstand it."

Mr. Treadwell felt a chill of horror penetrate him. "Then it's true, isn't it?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"This Blessington Method you're always talking about," said Mr. Treadwell wildly. "The whole idea is just to settle things by getting rid of old people!"

"Right!" said Bunce. "That is the exact idea. And not even J. G. Blessington himself ever phrased it better. You have a way with words, Mr. Treadwell. I always admire a man who can come to the point without sentimental twaddle."

"But you can't get away with it!" said Mr. Treadwell incredulously. "You don't really believe you can get away with it, do you?"

Bunce gestured toward the expanses beyond the closed door. "Isn't that sufficient evidence of the Society's success?"

"But all those people out there! Do they realize what's going on?"

"Like all well-trained personnel, Mr. Treadwell," said Bunce reproachfully, "they know only their own duties. What you and I are discussing here happens to be upper echelon."

Mr. Treadwell's shoulders drooped. "It's impossible," he said weakly. "It can't work."

"Come, come," Bunce said not unkindly, "you mustn't let yourself be overwhelmed. I imagine that what disturbs you most is what J. G. Blessington sometimes referred to as the Safety Factor. But look at it this way, Mr. Treadwell: isn't it perfectly natural for old people to die? Well, our Society guarantees that the deaths will appear natural. Investigations are rare — not one has ever caused us any trouble.

"More than that, you would be impressed by many of the names on our list of donors. People powerful in the political world as well as the financial world have been flocking to us. One and all, they could give glowing testimonials as to our efficiency. And remember that such important people make the Society for Gerontology invulnerable, no matter at what point it may be attacked, Mr. Treadwell. And such invulner-

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ability extends to every single one of our sponsors, including you, should you choose to place your problem in our hands."

"But I don't have the right," Mr. Treadwell protested despairingly. "Even if I wanted to, who am I to settle things this way for anybody?"

"Aha." Bunce leaned forward intently. "But you do want to settle things?"

"Not this way."

"Can you suggest any other way?"

Mr. Treadwell was silent.

"You see," Bunce said with satisfaction, "the Society for Gerontology offers the one practical answer to the problem. Do you still reject it, Mr. Treadwell?"

"I can't see it," Mr. Treadwell said stubbornly. "It's just not right."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Of course I am!" snapped Mr. Treadwell. "Are you going to tell me that it's right and proper to go around killing people just because they're old?"

"I am telling you that very thing, Mr. Treadwell, and I ask you to look at it this way. We are living today in a world of progress, a world of producers and consumers, all doing their best to improve our common lot. The old are neither producers nor consumers, so they are only barriers to our continued progress.

"If we want to take a brief, sentimental look into the pastoral haze of yesterday we may find that once they did serve a function. While the young were out tilling the fields, the old could tend to the household. But even that function is gone today. We have a hundred better devices for tending the household, and they come far cheaper. Can you dispute that?"

"I don't know," Mr. Treadwell said doggedly. "You're arguing that people are machines, and I don't go along with that at all."

"Good heavens," said Bunce, "don't tell me that you see them as anything else! Of course, we are machines, Mr. Treadwell, all of us. Unique and wonderful machines, I grant, but machines nevertheless. Why, look at the world around you. It is a vast organism made up of replaceable parts, all striving to produce and consume, produce and consume until worn out. Should one permit the worn-out part to remain where it is? Of course not! It must be cast aside so that the organism will not be made inefficient. It is the whole organism that counts, Mr. Treadwell, not any of its individual parts. Can't you understand that?"

"I don't know," said Mr. Treadwell uncertainly. "I've never thought of it that way. It's hard to take in all at once."

"I realize that, Mr. Treadwell, but it is part of The Blessington Method that the sponsor fully appreciate the great value of his contribution in all ways — not only as it benefits him, but also in the way it benefits the entire social organism. In signing a pledge to our Society a man is truly performing the most noble act of his life."

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"Pledge?" said Mr. Treadwell. "What kind of pledge?"

Bunce removed a printed form from a drawer of his desk and laid it out carefully for Mr. Treadwell's inspection. Mr. Treadwell read it and sat up sharply.

"Why, this says that I'm promising to pay you two thousand dollars in a month from now. You never said anything about that kind of money!"

"There has never been any occasion to raise the subject before this," Bunce replied. "But for some time now a committee of the Society has been examining your financial standing, and it reports that you can pay this sum without stress or strain."

"What do you mean, stress or strain?" Mr. Treadwell retorted. "Two thousand dollars is a lot of money, no matter how you look at it."

Bunce shrugged. "Every pledge is arranged in terms of the sponsor's ability to pay, Mr. Treadwell. Remember, what may seem expensive to you would certainly seem cheap to many other sponsors I have dealt with."

"And what do I get for this?"

"Within one month after you sign the pledge, the affair of your father-in-law will be disposed of. Immediately after that you will be expected to pay the pledge in full. Your name is then enrolled on our list of sponsors, and that is all there is to it."

"I don't like the idea of my name being enrolled on anything."

"I can appreciate that," said Bunce. "But may I remind you that a donation to a charitable organization such as the Society for Gerontology is tax-deductible?"

Mr. Treadwell's fingers rested lightly on the pledge. "Now just for the sake of argument," he said, "suppose someone signs one of these things and then doesn't pay up. I guess you know that a pledge like this isn't collectible under the law, don't you?"

"Yes," Bunce smiled, "and I know that a great many organizations cannot redeem pledges made to them in apparently good faith. But the Society for Gerontology has never met that difficulty. We avoid it by reminding all sponsors that the young, if they are careless, may die as unexpectedly as the old . . . No, no," he said, steadying the paper, "just your signature at the bottom will do."

When Mr. Treadwell's father-in-law was found drowned off the foot of East Sconsett pier three weeks later (the old man fished from the pier regularly although he had often been told by various local authorities that the fishing was poor there), the event was duly entered into the East Sconsett records as Death By Accidental Submersion, and Mr. Treadwell himself made the arrangements for an exceptionally elaborate funeral. And it was at the funeral that Mr. Treadwell first had the Thought. It was a fleeting and unpleasant thought, just disturbing enough to make him miss a step as he entered the church. In all

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the confusion of the moment, however, it was not too difficult to put aside.

A few days later, when he was back at his familiar desk, the Thought suddenly returned. This time it was not to be put aside so easily. It grew steadily larger and larger in his mind, until his waking hours were terrifyingly full of it, and his sleep a series of shuddering nightmares.

There was only one man who could clear up the matter for him, he knew; so he appeared at the offices of the Society for Gerontology burning with anxiety to have Bunce do so. He was hardly aware of handing over his check to Bunce and pocketing the receipt.

"There's something that's been worrying me," said Mr. Treadwell, coming straight to the point.

"Yes?"

"Well, do you remember telling me how many old people there would be around in twenty years?"

"Of course."

Mr. Treadwell loosened his collar to ease the constriction around his throat. "But don't you see? I'm going to be one of them!"

Bunce nodded. "If you take reasonably good care of yourself there's no reason why you shouldn't be," he pointed out.

"You don't get the idea," Mr. Treadwell said urgently. "I'll be in a spot then where I'll have to worry all the time about someone from this Society coming in and giving my daughter or my son-in-law ideas! That's a terrible thing to have to worry about all the rest of your life."

Bunce shook his head slowly. "You can't mean that, Mr. Treadwell."

"And why can't I?"

"Why? Well, think of your daughter, Mr. Treadwell. Are you thinking of her?"

"Yes."

"Do you see her as the lovely child who poured out her love to you in exchange for yours? The fine young woman who has just stepped over the threshold of marriage, but is always eager to visit you, eager to let you know the affection she feels for you?"

"I know that."

"And can you see in your mind's eye that manly young fellow who is her husband? Can you feel the warmth of his handclasp as he greets you? Do you know his gratitude for the financial help you give him regularly?"

"I suppose so."

"Now, honestly, Mr. Treadwell, can you imagine either of these affectionate and devoted youngsters doing a single thing — the slightest thing — to harm you?"

The constriction around Mr. Treadwell's throat miraculously eased; the chill around his heart departed.

"No," he said with conviction, "I can't."

"Splendid," said Bunce. He leaned far back in his chair and smiled with a kindly wisdom. "Hold on to that thought, Mr. Treadwell. Cherish it and keep it close at all times. It will be a solace and comfort to the very end."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **PHYLLIS BENTLEY**

TITLE: ***A Telegram for Miss Phipps***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Miss Marian Phipps, spinster-novelist

LOCALES: London and Southshire, England

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *It all started when Miss Phipps received a most curious telegram — and learned that a detective-novelist's responsibilities to her readers do not end with the publication of her book . . .*

THE TELEPHONE BELL RANG. MISS Phipps, leaving the hero of the story she was writing in mid-air as he fell from a mill chimney, uttered a savage imprecation and snatched up the receiver.

"Hullo!" she barked, furious at the interruption.

"Miss Marian Phipps?" said a pleasant female voice briskly. "This is Messrs. Bookey and Bookey."

Miss Phipps's countenance underwent a lightning change, for Bookey and Bookey were her own publishers. Delightful thoughts of Book Society choices, wonderful reviews, reprints, and fresh commissions coursed through her mind, wiping the frown from her brow with the magic touch of hope.

"Yes?" she purred expectantly.

"This is Mr. Richard Bookey's secretary. We have a telegram for you. Would you like to take it down?"

"Uh — yes," said Miss Phipps, perplexed but still hopeful.

"The telegram runs as follows," said the pleasant voice: "*Charles died this morning funeral Applesham Wednesday eleven thirty Cissie.*"

Miss Phipps gulped.

"Should I read it again?" said the pleasant voice without any hint of impatience — Miss Phipps was one of Bookeys' "valued" detective authors.

"Do," said Miss Phipps.

The pleasant voice read the message again, carefully spelling all the names. "Have you got that satisfactorily now?"

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"Look, my dear," said Miss Phipps. "How was this telegram addressed?"

"*Marian Phipps, care of Bookey and Bookey, London, W.C.2.* Handed in at Charing Cross, London, W.C.2. at 1:30 this afternoon. Would you like me to send it along to you by post?"

"Yes, please."

"I'll see to it at once, Miss Phipps. Goodbye."

"No, wait. I should like to speak to Mr. Richard Bookey, please."

"He's in conference at the moment, Miss Phipps."

"Then interrupt him."

The owner of the pleasant voice sighed, but obediently made the desired connection.

"Hullo, hullo, Marian! What do you want, my dear? I'm desperately busy this afternoon with my autumn list, not a moment to spare, three men hanging on my lightest word, please speak as quickly as you can, wouldn't a letter do instead? Yes, write me a nice long letter," urged Richard Bookey. His voice and mode of speech were quite inimitable, and Miss Phipps felt assured that she was in fact talking with the Richard Bookey she knew. "*The Mouse and the Lion* is going quite nicely. Nothing phenomenal, you know, but a good steady sale. Your next one coming along nicely, eh? Delivery date fixed yet? The end of October would give us nice time for the spring list. Has my girl told you about that telegram for you?" continued the publisher, suddenly infusing a suitable solemnity into his tone. "Hope it hasn't upset you too much? Not a near relative, I trust?"

"I never heard of any of them in my life," said Miss Phipps grimly.

"Eh? What?"

"I don't know Charles, Cissie, or Applesham."

There was a pause.

"That's a bit odd," said Mr. Bookey thoughtfully, for his bonhomous surface concealed an immense shrewdness. "There must be some mistake."

"Richard, you might get the post office to repeat and confirm all the names," suggested Miss Phipps.

"My dear, the girl's done that already. She's a conscientious sort of lass. New broom, you know. Energetic sweeper. Look, it must be some sort of hoax. You'd better take the telegram to the police. Or to your lawyer. Don't on any account go to Applesham — if there is such a place. You stay quietly at home and get on with your book. Remember, you promised it to us for the end of October."

"I did nothing of the kind, Richard," snapped Miss Phipps, banging down the receiver.

"The weather is certainly ideal for a country excursion," murmured Miss Phipps to herself on Wednesday as she drove along the winding roads which seemed to surround the village of Applesham.

She was entirely right. The sun shone, the sky was blue, the trees had that entrancing fresh green of early

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summer; the lilac and laburnum were in full bloom, the wide verges of the Southshire roads were gay with wild flowers, the grass in the gently sloping fields was deep and lush, and the brown and white cows swished their tails happily. Only Miss Phipps herself was out of harmony with the bright soft morning, for she was clad in mourning garments of a rather heavy style. All possible respect should be paid, she had decided, to Charles — whoever he was — and the natural grief of the unknown Cissie should also be properly deferred to.

Applesham, when at last she reached it, was one of those sweet little places which provide an epitome of English history. There was a Norman castle, in ruins; a Norman church, very little restored; a plain early Victorian vicarage fronted by a smooth lawn, a cedar tree, and a border of pink sweet williams and white canterbury bells; there was a wide main street with grass at the sides, a few tiny shops, some thatched cottages, and standing a little back from the road in a neglected lawn, a heavenly Queen Anne brick manor house in very bad repair. There was also the White Hart Inn, with a stone engraved 1443 over the door, which did not seem inclined to give Miss Phipps morning coffee, though a painted sign outside indicated its willingness to do so.

"Well, if you care to come into the lounge and wait, madam," said an old waitress with cheeks like a wrinkled apple, who emerged from a rear door when Miss Phipps rang the bell by the reception office, "I'll see what I can do. But we're all upset today, you see. Mrs. Carton said to me this morning, 'Tabitha,' she said, 'I don't know whether I'm on my head or my heels today.' "

"Ah," said Miss Phipps in a sympathetic tone. "The funeral."

"Yes." At this point Tabitha seemed for the first time to notice Miss Phipps's somber clothes. "You've come to attend? You knew him in London perhaps?"

Miss Phipps bowed her head silently.

"Poor Mr. Charles. It's a shame," said the old woman. "But perhaps you don't think so?"

She spoke with indignation, and Miss Phipps became aware of the difficulties of trying to pump people for information — one was far more likely, she discovered, to be pumped oneself. (Now if her friend Detective-Inspector Tarrant were there, he would know how to handle the matter properly.) Tabitha was gazing at her interrogatively.

"Ah," said Miss Phipps again, shaking her head in a manner to indicate that her thoughts about Charles were too deep for words.

"Do you believe it? What they say about him, I mean?" pressed the old woman.

"Not altogether," said Miss Phipps carefully.

"I daresay you're right," said Tabitha, nodding. "Things might look different if all had their due. I can't

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believe it of the young lady, either, can you? Though with such a husband, you could hardly wonder, perhaps?"

Acutely uncomfortable, afraid to say a wrong word that might damage some innocent person's reputation, Miss Phipps sought refuge in looking ostentatiously at the grandfather clock and comparing its time with that of her watch, which hung on her chest from a gold brooch in the form of a ribbon bow. This action luckily had the effect she desired — of sending Tabitha off in a hurry toward the kitchen to fetch her coffee.

During the waitress' absence, Miss Phipps examined the lounge. But she found nothing there of interest. It had been "done up" and was agreeably clad in chintz and lupins, with glossy country magazines scattered here and there on tables and settees. When Tabitha returned, Miss Phipps paid for the coffee at once and made a great show of being in a hurry, drinking the liquid almost scalding hot to escape any further questioning.

As she left the inn, Miss Phipps glanced up at the board above the door in search of the name of the licensee. *Hannah Carton*, she read. Well, that was neither Charles nor Cissie. Though in another sense it might possibly be Cissie, reflected Miss Phipps guiltily. Perhaps she ought to have — but how could one possibly explain such a matter to one's publisher? He was the last person in the world to understand a literary point of that kind, decided Miss Phipps, approaching the beautiful old church across the green.

The door stood open, and official-looking persons in black ties hovered around in the Norman porch. Miss Phipps observed that they looked more sincerely regretful than such persons often do at funerals. She entered, and choosing an obscure side pew knelt, and prayed that if these unknowns, Charles and Cissie, needed her she might not fail them in their need. Then she sat down and waited.

It was very quiet and peaceful in the little church, with the summer breeze wandering in through the open door and gently stirring the old banners hanging from the walls. Miss Phipps was not bored. There was plenty to look at near at hand: brass plates and stone plaques and even a tomb with the effigy of a Norman knight and his lady, all to the honor of the de Coulcy family — or rather, the name was de Coulcy at first, but had become Coulcy by the time generals died in the Crimea under Queen Victoria and second lieutenants perished in the 1914 war. Was Charles a Coulcy?

"Probably," decided Miss Phipps. "Lived in that decaying manor house, I shouldn't wonder. Poor. Several sets of death duties in the last two wars have nearly wiped out the estate. I still don't see what he had to do with me, however."

But now the church bell began to toll, footsteps sounded outside, and the organ began to play. Miss Phipps, looking about her, perceived that

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while she had been reflecting on the Coulcy misfortunes, a considerable number of persons had entered the church. They were of all kinds — "gentle and simple," reflected Miss Phipps. Proud of her power of observing character, she amused herself by picking out the doctor, the lawyer, the tenant farmers, the "county" friends from a distance with their respective daughters, the sisters and wives, and the inevitable pewfuls of middle-aged spinsters of the parish, clinging to each other and rather in a twitter. A large hot elderly woman puffed in at the last moment who was almost certainly Hannah Carton, since she was accompanied by the wrinkled Tabitha. All these had arranged themselves, with that natural decorum so characteristic of the English, in descending order of their acquaintance with the deceased, leaving a great swath of empty pews in the front for the accommodation of the relatives.

The Vicar, old, lean, silvery, sad, came out of the vestry and walked down the aisle; then, pronouncing solemn and beautiful sentences, he turned and led the cortège towards the altar. Miss Phipps observed it all keenly.

The coffin was handsome, the flowers superb.

The chief mourner was a tall fair good-looking young man of military bearing, who walked alone looking thoroughly miserable. Next came a thin, stooping scholarly man with a sweet-faced elderly lady at his side; both had aquiline, distinguished faces and agreeably silvered hair. The same lean handsome face — no doubt a Coulcy heritage — was to be seen on the man of the next couple, who was tall, dark-haired, fortyish, and very much alive, with a large expressive mouth and sparkling dark brown eyes; his wife, as tall and handsome as himself, was clearly expecting a child very shortly, but carried this off with calm assurance and the aid of a good dressmaker.

"What a lovely girl!" thought Miss Phipps in admiration as the next couple passed by.

Indeed she was exquisite: small, fair, slender, very young, with immense gray eyes and a dazzling complexion, beautifully dressed and groomed. She walked steadily, held her head up, kept her face still, but there was no mistaking the fact that she was struck to the heart with grief. Beside her walked a much older man, tall, fleshy and sallow — good-looking enough if you liked that slightly gross, self-satisfied, dominating style.

"I don't," decided Miss Phipps.

All these mourners went without hesitation to the front pew; the others — a mass of second cousins and aunts, decided Miss Phipps, dismissing them after a shrewd look — milled about, politely yielding precedence to each other, and at last sorted themselves out and sat down.

Miss Phipps had never in her life seen a single one of those present in the church — that is, not before today.

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"Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God of His great mercy to take unto himself the soul of our dear brother Charles Ranulf here departed," began the Vicar.

"Ah, it's Charles all right," reflected Miss Phipps.

Presently the Vicar delivered a little address. It was not his custom on such occasions, he explained, but today he felt impelled to do so. Charles, it seemed, had shown splendid courage in the recent war; he was generous, loyal, friendly, honorable, of great prowess in all manly sports, and very much beloved; his faults, which he himself would be the first to admit, sprang from the excess of his good qualities.

"Wine, women, and song, I suppose," thought Miss Phipps, sighing. "I wonder how old he was and how he died?"

The service ended; the Vicar led the way to the graveside. Miss Phipps followed and concealed herself behind a nearby marble slab. At that terrible moment, always so cruel to those who really care, when the handful of dust rattles upon the lid of the coffin, the beautiful girl could not restrain a sorrowful exclamation. The tall man took her arm in his grasp — a very strong grasp, thought Miss Phipps, watching it all from the rear, if it were meant to support and console her.

The chief mourners now withdrew, but the rest seemed inclined to linger, examining the wreaths and discussing the deceased. But, the decorum of the occasion preventing gossip, Miss Phipps could learn little more of Charles than the Vicar had already told her. Not relishing the prospect of another interview with Tabitha, she withdrew to the next village for lunch, and returned later in the afternoon to investigate privately.

Yes, Charles was a Coulcy. Aged 39. There were very handsome wreaths from Captain Gerard Coulcy, Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Coulcy, Dr. Everard and Miss Hermione Coulcy, Sir Richard and Lady Quinberry, Cannon and the Misses Bingham; these from their position close by the open grave were obviously regarded as coming from those nearest to the deceased. There were wreaths too from Charles's old regiment, from all kinds of groups and associations in county and town, from "his old nurse Hannah Carton," from friends galore. There were no flowers from anyone called Cissie, or Cecilia, or any cognate appellation. But in a corner there lay a bunch of fine yellow roses — "what is known as a spray, I believe," reflected Miss Phipps — which bore no card, no name.

"That's from Cissie," thought Miss Phipps.

She climbed into her car thoughtfully. She was no nearer to understanding the mystery of the telegram than when she had first come to Applesham, but somehow she now felt deeply involved and pledged to its solution. She liked Charles, grieved for the beautiful girl, disliked the sallow bossy man, felt troubled for the unknown Cissie.

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She drove down the wide village street and was about to turn right to return to London when suddenly she saw that the left arm of the signpost announced *Brittlesea 16 miles.* Now Brittlesea was the home of Detective-Inspector Tarrant, in whose cases she had often been associated. On a sudden impulse she swung the wheel to the left.

That a crash did not result was due chiefly to the excellent driving of the young woman in the large dark green van just turning the corner, but partly to Miss Phipps's own capacity for keeping her head. There was an alarming moment when the van and Miss Phipps's little car appeared to be charging each other head on, then Miss Phipps wrenched her wheel, the van driver wrenched her wheel, Miss Phipps found her hat in one hedge and the van young woman found hers in the other. They dismounted and examined their respective vehicles — Miss Phipps in the carefree spirit of an owner whose car has been scratched before, the van young woman in some anxiety.

"Are you marked at all?" called Miss Phipps cheerfully.

"I don't know yet," snapped the young woman.

She bent over the rear fender. Miss Phipps approached her.

"No. It's not marked, thank goodness. I beg your pardon for sounding so bad-tempered, but you see the van's the property of the Southshire County Council, and you know what these public bodies are."

"I do indeed. The affair was entirely my fault and I apologize," said Miss Phipps. "I changed my mind suddenly and decided to go to Brittlesea instead of London."

She laughed. After a moment, when the girl looked disapprovingly at her from beneath raised eyebrows, the girl laughed too.

"Pleasant girl," thought Miss Phipps. "Modern type. Educated. Speaks well. Stands straight. Thick dark hair. Good brown eyes. Cotton frock and sandals, cheap but tasteful. Lady. Virtuous. Salt of earth. Worried."

"Are you by any chance Miss Marian Phipps?" said the van girl.

Miss Phipps colored with pleasure.

"Now how did you know that?"

"Oh, it's not too difficult," said the girl airily.

She moved round to the back of the van and pulled a lever. The doors swung open. Miss Phipps gave a cry of delighted surprise. The van was lined with shelves of books, and on a tiny table lay boxes of index cards.

"Why, it's a traveling library!" she exclaimed.

"Yes. County Council Mobile Library Service. We visit the outlying villages. Here's your latest detective book, you see."

She picked up the brightly jacketed *The Mouse and the Lion* and turned it over, so that Miss Phipps saw her own bespectacled countenance smirking up at her from the back flap of the wrapper. Not for the first time she indulged the wistful hope that she

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looked less idiotic in real life than in her photographs.

"It's in good demand," said the library girl.

"Do tell me about your work," said Miss Phipps. "I'm really interested."

The library girl began to describe her routine in an offhand way, but perceiving from Miss Phipps' questions that her interest was genuine, warmed up and revealed her real enthusiasm. Miss Phipps adored anything to do with libraries. Accordingly, it was several minutes later when they were roused from an absorbing talk by the sound of violent hooting, and looking out from the back of the van they saw that their vehicles were impeding the progress of a young man in a jeep with a netted trailer full of pigs. They parted hurriedly and Miss Phipps drove away.

"I am not exactly a fool, my dear Bob," said Miss Phipps to Detective-Inspector Tarrant. Remembering the photograph on her book jacket she added hurriedly, "However much of one I may appear."

The Inspector gave a deprecating cough.

"And therefore I can guess why Cissie sent me that telegram."

"Can you indeed?" said the Inspector, somewhat startled.

"Yes. By the way, my dear boy," said Miss Phipps in a casual tone, "have you read my latest novel yet?"

"Oh — no. Not yet," admitted the Inspector, coloring. "Mary has," he added, looking across at his young American wife, who had just come downstairs from putting the baby to bed. "Haven't you, dear?"

"Yes, indeed. I'm one of Miss Phipps's most enthusiastic fans," said Mary. "I thought *The Mouse and the Lion* was one of your best, Miss Phipps. It was so neat the way that insignificant little typist Cissie said the word which started unraveling the whole mystery."

"Cissie?" said the Inspector, really startled now.

"Yes. The person who sent the telegram inviting me to Charles Coulcy's funeral took the name of a character in my own book — the character who started the investigation of the murder."

"Oh, come, Miss Phipps," said the Inspector uneasily.

"Obviously the person who sent me the telegram did so because she thought Charles Coulcy was murdered. She is the insignificant little person in the background who gives the warning which eventually will catch the murderer."

"Oh, come, come!"

"She relied on my intelligence to perceive this, and," said Miss Phipps, beaming over her pince-nez, "I shall not fail her."

There was an awkward silence.

"But Miss Phipps," objected Mary, "in your book it was an old woman who was murdered by poison by her grandson — the circumstances aren't in the least the same."

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"No, no, of course not," said Miss Phipps impatiently. "Only the character of Cissie, and her role in the tragedy, are the same."

"But why should she appeal to *you*? Why not inform the police? And why not use her real name?"

"My dear Mary," said Miss Phipps. "It's such a pleasure to talk to you — you always pierce through the cluttering detail to the essentials of a problem. The answer to all three of your questions is the same: *she is too close to the murderer*. So, from the shelter of anonymity, she sets me on the trail."

There was another silence.

"Look, Miss Phipps," said Tarrant at length, in a soothing tone. "I don't want to be unkind or to offend you, you know, but I must state my honest opinion. All that stuff about Cissie is so far-fetched as to be quite preposterous."

"You think so? That's a very helpful observation, Bob," said Miss Phipps thoughtfully.

"How so?" said the Inspector, puzzled.

"To me the Cissie theory isn't preposterous at all. To you it is. Therefore, to my kind of person it isn't preposterous, to your kind it is. Therefore, Cissie is *my* kind of person — that is, a writer, or a keen reader, somebody in some way familiar with books. Now, that's very helpful, Bob — it narrows the field, which otherwise would be distressingly wide."

"Isn't that a little — I mean, will so many people have read —"

"You think I'm exaggerating the size of my public? You forget the mobile library, Bob. Anyone in the whole of East Southshire could have read *The Mouse and the Lion*."

"But surely you don't seriously think Charles Coulcy was murdered?"

"He fell from the balcony of the London house of that highly publicized financier Sir Richard Quinberry while drunk. See the *Southshire Gazette* for last Saturday. There is some scandal about a young lady and Charles in London. See Tabitha of the White Hart Inn. Cissie asks a detective novelist — who is known, by the way, to have solved real cases — to come and investigate. I think that's enough to rouse suspicion, don't you?"

"No," said Tarrant bluntly. "Don't you see, Miss Phipps, the whole thing's a mare's-nest? A mistake made by some telegraph clerk in the Charing Cross post office. The address of one telegram has accidentally been put on the contents of another. Somewhere there is a Coulcy relation who received no telegram about Charles's funeral because the telegram meant for him went to you. And somewhere somebody is furious because you have not replied to the telegram he sent you, because you never received it."

"In that case," inquired Miss Phipps blandly, "who is Cissie?"

"Of course she must be a Coulcy, or connected with the family."

"There's no Cissie or Cecilia or any similar name in the Coulcy family tree," said Miss Phipps.

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"A pet name," grunted Tarrant.

Miss Phipps picked up her notebook and read out emphatically: "Captain Gerard Coulcy, seconded to War Office, younger brother and heir to Charles, unmarried. Dr. Everard Coulcy, uncle to Charles, Master of Southstone College, Oxbridge, unmarried. Sister Hermione Coulcy lives with him. Stephen Coulcy, cousin to Charles, barrister, married to Ruth, with issue Stephen, Henry, Philip — and another one coming," she added. "You'll have some difficulty in finding a Cissie amongst those names, Bob."

Tarrant snorted. "A secretary or housekeeper," he suggested.

"Secretaries or housekeepers don't allude to their employers by their first name only and sign by their own first names only, in solemn telegrams," said Miss Phipps.

"You've got something there, Miss Phipps," agreed Mary.

"On the other hand, I don't see a Cissie of *your* kind amongst that crowd," said Tarrant crossly. "Barristers and Masters of Colleges and Captains in the Guards don't send telegrams to unknown novelists — to novelists they don't know, I mean," Tarrant corrected himself hastily — "signed by the name of a fictitious character in the novelist's latest detective story."

"You're quite right, Bob," said Miss Phipps without resentment. "To discover the identity of Cissie is likely to be a difficult task. I take it I have to do it without your aid?"

"I'm afraid so," said Tarrant.

"How will you begin, Miss Phipps dear?" asked Mary solicitously.

"Bob has unintentionally furnished me with an excellent plan," beamed Miss Phipps.

"I am not quite clear what you wish to ask me, Miss — uh — Phipps," said the barrister, Mr. Stephen Coulcy, in his full mellow tones, "and I am afraid I cannot give you very much time — I am due in court in half an hour. So if you would be as explicit as possible, I should be grateful. The message on your card mentioned a telegram and the Coulcy family."

"Yes. I received a telegram addressed to me and purporting to come from someone named Cissie, informing me of Mr. Charles Coulcy's death and inviting me to his funeral. *Charles died this morning funeral Applesham Wednesday eleven thirty Cissie.* As I was not acquainted with Charles Coulcy, I thought there must be some mistake."

"Good Lord, yes!" said the barrister, staring. "That must have given you a considerable shock. Didn't you know Charles at all, then?"

"No."

"He was one of the most lovable fellows I ever knew," said Mr. Coulcy emphatically. "However — Cissie, you say? A curious set of mistakes on the part of our great G.P.O.! Address and sender belong to one party, you; message belongs to another party, presumably some Coulcy."

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"No — Cissie is unknown to me."

"Well, she's certainly unknown to *me*," said Mr. Coulcy. "There's no Cissie in the Coulcy family — or even among our friends and acquaintances. But perhaps the name was a misprint, a misinterpretation? Cissie, Coulcy — same number of letters. A not impossible confusion? What do you think?"

"The name was checked. You yourself, then," went on Miss Phipps, "have not received some telegram mysterious to you, which might have been intended for me?"

"Certainly not at home — and not to my knowledge here in chambers. But I'll ask my clerk."

He pressed a bell on his desk and asked for the clerk to come to him.

"You can understand," pursued Miss Phipps, "that I am anxious to find this missing telegram addressed to me."

"Of course."

"I am rather disturbed lest I am losing some royalties by its non-delivery."

"Royalties? I can see, Miss Phipps," said Mr. Coulcy, bending towards her genially, "that I ought to know who you are and what you do. But I don't, you know. Will you forgive me and enlighten my ignorance?"

"You don't read detective stories, then?" said Miss Phipps. "I write them."

"I never read anything but briefs, nowadays," smiled the barrister.

"I congratulate you on the size of your practice. And your wife?"

"Ruth? She's a musician; you know. Piano. In her spare time — when she has any. Children keep her busy. Never reads fiction."

"That takes care of her, then. But in any case," reflected Miss Phipps, "Ruth, as I remember her in Applesham Church, would never regard herself as Cissie."

"If I may advise you, Miss Phipps," continued the barrister, resuming a formal courtesy. "I suggest you take this matter to the police. They could probably make the Post Office show the original form on which the telegram was written. On the back would be found the name and address of the sender. You could then get in touch with that sender."

"Thank you," said Miss Phipps. "That's very helpful."

"I myself," continued the barrister, "neither sent nor received a telegram concerning my cousin's death or funeral. His younger brother, Gerard, telephoned me late at night from Salisbury Plain, where he was engaged on War Office business and informed me that Charles had fallen from the balcony of Sir Richard Quinberry's house and was lying seriously injured in the Thameside Hospital. I went there immediately and remained through the night, and was joined there by Gerard as soon as he could reach London. But poor Charles was unconscious and died the next morning. I was in touch with young Gerard all the time. I mention this because, so far as I can see, only one person could properly have sent a telegram in such terms as you de-

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scribe — namely, my cousin Gerard — and only one person could properly have had such a telegram addressed to him — namely, my uncle, Dr. Everard Coulcy of Southstone College, Oxbridge. You could perhaps ask them. But in my opinion the police are best able to handle your problem. Ah, here comes Mr. Sitherside, who will give you a definite answer to your question about mysterious telegrams here. I'm afraid I myself must now leave you."

Mr. Sitherside, small, neat, dried-up, with very shrewd blue eyes, listened with his head on one side to Miss Phipps's explanation, and replied, "We have received no telegram which was not perfectly comprehensible to us."

"Do you read detective stories, Mr. Sitherside?" inquired Miss Phipps impishly.

She fled away from the clerk's look of horror in such discomfiture that she almost fell down the uneven stone stairs of the old legal Inn.

"Your best plan," said one of the agreeable young ladies behind the Charing Cross Post Office counter, "is to telephone from one of the boxes over there. Of course you have to pay for the service, you know."

Miss Phipps did the necessary dialing, explaining, and inserting of coins.

"*Marian Phipps, Bookey and Bookey, London, W.C. 2*," read the voice from Enquiries. "That the one?" She read out the whole telegram.

"Yes. I want the name and address of the sender from the back of the telegram, please."

"The sender's name is: A. Cissie," read the girl. She spelled it letter by letter. "The address is Applesham."

"Thank you," said Miss Phipps.

"That all you want to know?"

"That's all."

It was a warm, sunny day, but Miss Phipps felt a chill down the back of her neck as she left the telephone box. So Bob Tarrant thought her idea about Cissie preposterous! Well, well . . .

"But we are delighted to see you, my dear Miss Phipps," said Dr. Everard Coulcy, the Master of Southstone. "Delighted to have the opportunity of meeting one who has given my sister and myself so many hours of pleasure. I read your detective stories aloud to my sister while she embroiders."

"Tapestry," put in Miss Hermione, raising her head from a very fine example of that kind of work.

"We enjoy them because they are exercises in pure ratiocination," continued the Master.

"No foolish thrills," said his sister, returning to her work.

"We found *The Mouse and the Lion* particularly good. The various threads of the mystery resembled a hopelessly entangled net, yet when the young typist said the key word, she pulled on the one thread that made the whole series of events and motives come out straight and clear. What was her name, Hermione?"

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"Cissie," said Hermione. "And the key word was *string*."

Miss Phipps started. Hermione raised her eyes. Miss Phipps stared full into them; they met her gaze calmly, clear and untroubled.

"However, this is not to the point," continued Dr. Coulcy. "I regret very much that we are not able to help you, Miss Phipps. We have received no telegram which might have been intended for you. Indeed the news of poor Charles's accident and subsequent death came to us not by telegram but by telephone. Sir Richard Quinberry, in whose house the unfortunate accident occurred, telephoned us that night after the ambulance had taken poor Charles away, and my nephew Gerard telephoned us on the following morning after Charles's death. Poor Charles never regained consciousness after the fall, you know."

"I don't know why you keep saying *poor* Charles, Everard," said his sister with sudden asperity.

"My dear, in spite of all his faults, I was very much attached to him, and he was a young man, with half his life yet to live."

"But very little to live for. The girl to whom he was engaged was killed by a flying bomb in the war," said Hermione, addressing Miss Phipps. "And he had recently decided that the Manor House would have to be sold to keep the Applesham estate solvent. What had he left for which he cared? He was slipping into habits of unworthy dissipation. When I last saw him, at Christmas, I was shocked by the change in his appearance and personality. His fatal fall was perhaps a merciful dispensation of Providence."

"He had Gerard to care for, and Gerard cared greatly for him. He might have pulled himself up and even married somebody else. But these family affairs cannot interest Miss Phipps, my dear," said Dr. Coulcy. "I am truly sorry we cannot be of service in your search for the missing telegram, Miss Phipps. If you will accompany me to my study, I will instruct my secretary to look again through all my recent correspondence, but I fear the result will be negative."

Dr. Coulcy's secretary, a rather tousled but mild and erudite gentleman who declared himself personally unacquainted with Mr. Charles Coulcy, confirmed this verdict.

"Dear, dear! I wish we could have helped you. But meanwhile, Miss Phipps, my sister and I hope you will stay to tea?"

"Thank you very much. Are these family portraits?" asked Miss Phipps, gazing in awe at the walls of the stately corridor as they returned to the drawing-room.

"No, no. Just previous Masters," explained Dr. Coulcy. "A long tradition." He began to recount their names, dates, and histories with great precision; his memory could certainly be relied upon.

"And you *sent* no telegram about Mr. Coulcy's death?" Miss Phipps slipped into the stream.

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"No, no. I had no occasion to do so, since Gerard and Stephen already knew of it. Now this Master," said Dr. Coulcy with relish, "must have been a very odd old boy, because . . ."

"I must try the non-literary ones next, I suppose," thought Miss Phipps with a sigh. "Still, one learns a little here and a little there."

Mrs. Hannah Carton had told Miss Phipps the whole history of Charles Coulcy's birth, infancy, teething, childhood, boyhood, schooldays, war service, and the tragic loss of his fiancée, and had now reached the present decade. Born in the north of England, she had accompanied Charles's mother to Applesham on her marriage, and brought up the two boys, Charles and the much younger Gerard, till her own marriage to the Coulcy butler; then with Carton's sister, the parlormaid Tabitha, they had left the Coulcy service and took over the White Hart Inn.

"So you see, love, his death is a great grief to me," said the good old woman with tears in her large brown eyes. "The manner of it too! Falling drunk off a balcony! What would Lady Honoria have said to that? Poor Mr. Charles! He's never been the same since he lost poor Miss Bingham."

"Ah, Miss Bingham," said Miss Phipps, vaguely remembering a wreath which bore that name.

"Yes, love — Miss Caroline Bingham, the eldest of the Vicar's girls. Handsome she was — oh, yes, handsome and spirited — it was a treat to see her on a horse. The Vicar's youngest, now, Miss Elizabeth — her that's Lady Quinberry — some say she's very beautiful, but she isn't a patch on Miss Caroline, not a patch, I tell you straight. Miss Bingham was in the Army in the war — the A.T.S. or the W.A.A.C.'s or whatever they were called — very high up she was at headquarters in London, and she was in St. James's Church that Sunday morning when it got a direct hit. Yes, killed outright. Poor Mr. Charles! Poor Miss Caroline! A fine young lady if ever there was one! Straight as a die! It's no use telling me," said Mrs. Carton on a peevish note, "that Miss Elizabeth's a patch on her, because she isn't. Throwing Mr. Gerard over the way she did, for that Sir Richard Quinberry who is old enough to be her father! Some say it was just a lovers' tiff, but I say it was because that Sir Richard had a couple of million pounds. Pity Mr. Charles ever invited him down here. Miss Elizabeth has always been spoilt, that's what I say, with her mother dying when she was born and her elder sisters making such a fuss of her. I grant you she's the only fair one and pretty enough like a doll on a Christmas tree, but she's not a patch on Miss Caroline. That's why I can't believe it — I just can't *believe* it — when they say Mr. Charles has been running after Lady Quinberry up in London."

She looked in anxious question at Miss Phipps, who replied firmly, "I

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shouldn't believe it for a moment if I were you."

Mrs. Carton's honest face beamed with relief.

"There now! Didn't I say so to Tabby? It isn't likely he would, is it? After Miss Caroline. And with Miss Elizabeth, Lady Quinberry I should say, having been his brother's girl and all. He was much too fond of Mr. Gerard to do any such thing — he always looked after Mr. Gerard, him being so much younger. But it's been said about in the village, Miss Phipps — it has indeed! They've been seen in London — dining together, you know. And then to fall off Sir Richard's balcony, drunk! Whatever would Lady Honoria have said? As for telegrams, I didn't send any nor yet receive any, Miss Phipps. The Vicar himself came across and told me about Mr. Charles, Miss Georgiana being off as usual like, with her van."

"With her van?" exclaimed Miss Phipps.

"Her library van, you know," said Mrs. Carton. "Young ladies all work nowadays, you know, times not being what they were, Miss Phipps. Of course the Vicar is a Canon now and I daresay that helps, but Miss Georgiana and —"

At this moment the clock struck, the bar had to be opened, and Miss Phipps took the opportunity to escape.

It was an action she was to regret.

"My father," said Georgiana Bingham firmly, sitting very erect on one of the broken-springed Vicarage armchairs, "is writing a commentary on the Book of Job, and this is one of the very few hours when he is at leisure to devote himself to it. I really don't want to disturb him, and I assure you that all business matters in this house go through my hands."

"I'm sure they do — and very capable hands too," thought Miss Phipps, observing them as they lay, slim and brown, in their owner's lap, and remembering their swift accurate wrench on the van's wheel.

Aloud she said, "If you could just assure me that you neither sent nor received a telegram about Mr. Charles Coulcy's death, then I could pursue my researches elsewhere."

"We neither sent nor received any telegram about Mr. Charles Coulcy's death," said Georgiana Bingham steadily.

Miss Phipps was staggered. She could not believe that this girl with the honest eyes, the erect carriage, the good plain face, the vicarage background of faded chintz and Sunday School classes and early service, would lie.

And yet! Surely she *must* be Cissie? Everything fitted: her appearance, her character, the position of her home so near the Manor House, her sister's marriage, her access to *The Mouse and the Lion.*

"When I met you the other day in the van," began Miss Phipps.

"You didn't mention this telegram affair to me then," said Georgiana sternly.

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"I didn't know who you were, then," countered Miss Phipps.

Georgiana's face cleared. "No, of course you didn't — how stupid of me! I beg your pardon," she said.

"When I met you and you showed me your delightful mobile library," began Miss Phipps again, "there was a copy of my latest novel, *The Mouse and the Lion*, lying on the desk."

"Yes."

"Forgive me — excuse me — I dislike this inquiry very much," panted Miss Phipps, "but it is essential. Have you read *The Mouse and the Lion?*"

"No," said Georgiana.

"What?" gasped Miss Phipps. "No?"

Georgiana shook her head.

"Word of honor?"

"Word of honor. It must sound very rude of me," said Georgiana, coloring. "I'm truly sorry. But you see archeology is my real subject, and my library work gives me all too little time for it. So you see —"

"I see perfectly," said Miss Phipps. "So you don't know Cissie?"

"I'm afraid I don't."

"Oh, Lord," cried Miss Phipps in great distress. "That really knocks me flat! Bob Tarrant must be right after all. Unless of course the Quinberrys —"

Georgiana Bingham frowned.

"Miss Phipps," she said earnestly, leaning forward, "is it really so important to you to find this missing telegram?"

"Well, it might be, you see," said Miss Phipps feebly.

"Because if it is not — I should be rather glad," said Georgiana carefully, "if my sister need not be troubled in the matter."

"She was much distressed at the funeral, I noticed," said Miss Phipps, recovering a little.

Georgiana scowled.

"If you have heard any gossip about my sister and Mr. Charles Coulcy, you should disregard it as totally mistaken," she said sternly. "Mr. Coulcy and my sister had, it is true, met each other frequently of late, but it was to discuss a matter of business."

"Oh, my dear, I know all about it," said Miss Phipps in a gush of sympathy. "Elizabeth, who hasn't a very strong character, had a tiff with Gerard, who was too high-minded to ask her to marry him because the estate's in a mess and he has no money. Sir Richard caught her on the rebound. She's wretched with him and weeps out her wretchedness to Gerard. Gerard confided this, as he confided everything, to Charles. Charles, who was devoted to his brother and had a good deal of influence with your father, tried to find some way of making that beastly Quinberry give Elizabeth a divorce so that she can marry Gerard. Then Charles broke his neck and there seems no hope for poor Elizabeth. Isn't all that true?"

"One thing at least is true," said Georgiana, and her eyes were bright and hard. "Sir Richard Quinberry is a beast of the first water — a loath-

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some, sensual, cruel, clever devil."

"Yes, I could see you were worried about your sister. It strikes me as odd, you know," said Miss Phipps more calmly, "that when Charles fell, Sir Richard telephoned Captain Gerard Coulcy on Salisbury Plain and Dr. Everard Coulcy in Oxbridge, but did not telephone Mr. Stephen Coulcy who is on the spot in London. Stephen did not hear of the accident until Gerard telephoned him. The result was a delay before Charles was seen by any of his relatives, and by the time he was seen, he was quite unconscious, and never spoke again. His silence was convenient."

"Miss Phipps, don't go to see my sister!" exclaimed Georgiana. "Richard will worm it all out of her, and be furious. When he is vexed for any reason, he makes Elizabeth suffer for it. Please don't go!" Georgiana was pleading and Miss Phipps forced herself to be stern.

"I must. You see, my dear," said Miss Phipps, shaking her head, "you haven't read *The Mouse and the Lion.* You're not Cissie. I can't give up my quest until I've found Cissie. Cissie has something important to tell me about Charles's death — I feel certain of that. I *must* find Cissie."

"Though who on earth Cissie can be," she reflected as she drove rapidly back to London and Sir Richard Quinberry's elegant Mayfair address, "I simply cannot imagine. Unless it's Elizabeth Quinberry. If so, she must have more intelligence than all the others give her credit for."

By the time Miss Phipps reached London the summer twilight was falling; by the time she drew her little car up in front of Sir Richard's house, a white crescent of moon was riding in the darkening sky. It was absurdly late to make a call, and the butler who answered the door clearly took this view. But Miss Phipps, though she always looked an odd old trout — she had heard a young thing call her this once, and retained the memory as a salutary self-discipline — could on occasion produce an air of convincing authority. She produced it now; the man admitted her, showed her to a handsome drawing-room on the first floor, and went in search of Lady Quinberry.

"How do people still manage to have money like this?" wondered Miss Phipps, looking about her. "Can it be acquired honestly nowadays?"

The long high room, painted throughout in clear white, was furnished with some beautiful examples of Chippendale. The upholstery was white; a superb jar of early Wedgwood Queensware held masses of gorgeous blue and orange "Bird of Paradise" flowers against the wall. One pair of the long French windows stood open.

"Ah, the balcony!" said Miss Phipps, advancing towards it.

The balcony had an ironwork railing of an agreeable pattern, painted pale green. It was not a high railing, but neither was it particularly low.

"I don't quite see how anyone could fall over it," thought Miss Phipps

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grimly, "even if drunk. Charles was a tall powerful fellow, too, to judge from the size of his coffin. The best way, I suppose, would be to make him trip and then seize his back leg and heave."

She stood on the balcony, her hands on the railing, and looked down. Below lay a small plot of garden, fringed by trees. It was, certainly, a small garden compared with those of the Manor House and the Vicarage at Applesham, but Miss Phipps, who knew that the ground rents of Mayfair houses were fabulously high, registered the existence of any garden at all as one more indication of Sir Richard's wealth. The garden was quiet and secluded, and edged all round by an asphalt path.

"Convenient," reflected Miss Phipps.

Behind her a door opened. She slipped back into the room.

"Poor little Elizabeth! Poor young thing!" thought Miss Phipps in heartfelt sympathy.

At first sight her pity seemed uncalled for. In a striking full-skirted dress of rustling white — "one of those new materials," reflected Miss Phipps — Lady Quinberry looked even more beautiful than in the elegant black suit she had worn at the funeral. The lovely lines of her throat and arms, the dazzling purity of her complexion, the gleam of her wonderful pale gold hair, were enough to make any girl proudly happy. Diamonds sparkled in her charming ears and in a magnificent bracelet round her slender wrist. But her eyes were dull with anguish.

She smiled — the troubled, pleading smile of a little girl afraid of a scolding — and held out her hand.

"I'm afraid I didn't quite understand what you wanted? My sister knows you, of course."

"So Georgiana telephoned!" thought Miss Phipps, a little surprised.

"I'm afraid I haven't read any of your books," continued Lady Quinberry in her sweet wistful tones. "I don't seem to have much time for reading."

Miss Phipps had met this excuse a thousand times before. Her usual tart reply rose to her lips: "We can always find time to do what we want." But she repressed it — the child looked so very forlorn. As for sending Miss Phipps a telegram under the name of one of Miss Phipps's characters, poor Elizabeth might just possibly have read *The Mouse and the Lion* and be lying about it, but she simply wouldn't have had the brain to work out such a plan. She wasn't the telegraphing Cissie.

"It was just that a telegram addressed to me became mixed with a telegram concerning the death of Mr. Charles Coulcy," explained Miss Phipps in her kindest tones. "I am trying to find my telegram."

"Charles?" exclaimed Lady Quinberry. "He's dead, you know."

"What is this about Charles?" said an angry voice.

Lady Quinberry started aside, and her husband was revealed behind her.

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"What is this about Charles?" repeated Sir Richard, advancing into the room.

"Sir Richard Quinberry? My name is Phipps —"

"A telegram about Charles's death," fluttered Elizabeth, interrupting her.

"What?" barked Sir Richard. "What is the meaning of this? Who is this person? What has she to do with Charles? Is this an attempt at blackmail, madam?"

"Certainly not!" exclaimed Miss Phipps, turning scarlet. "I have lost a telegram addressed to me, and —".

"Leave us, Elizabeth," commanded Sir Richard, turning to his wife.

"Catherine knows her, Robert," faltered Elizabeth.

("Catherine? Who in the world is Catherine?" marveled Miss Phipps.)

"Leave us!"

Poor Lady Quinberry gave Miss Phipps a deprecating smile, then, hanging her head, went out of the room. Her pale gold hair fell on each side of her perfect face. "She really is exceptionally lovely, poor child," thought Miss Phipps.

In watching her, Miss Phipps had forgotten Sir Richard, whom she now discovered to be towering close beside her. He looked well in his admirably tailored dinner jacket, and appeared taller and more powerful than in the Applesham church — there was muscle beneath the smooth black cloth. His face however had the sagging flesh, the fatigued color, and the deep telltale lines, of the roué, and Miss Phipps disliked him heartily.

"And now kindly explain yourself."

"I received a telegram about Mr. Charles Coulcy's death —"

"From whom?"

"I have no idea."

"What! Nonsense! It was Gerard Coulcy who sent you here," said Sir Richard in a low tone of fury. "Admit it, you come from Gerard."

"No."

"Yes, Gerard sent you," repeated Sir Richard. "He sent you to my wife. You think there was something strange about Charles's death — is that what it is? Is that it?" he shouted suddenly.

His yellow eyes blazed with a strange wild fire, and Miss Phipps thought, "The man is mad."

"You came to investigate? That is right? Look," said Sir Richard, seizing her arm in an iron grasp and impelling her towards the open window. "I will show you exactly how Charles's death happened. Then you can tell Gerard, and Gerard can tell my wife."

"The man's mad with jealousy," decided Miss Phipps. "He loves that child and knows she loves Gerard."

She found that she was on the balcony. Sir Richard swung her towards the railing. She was like a stuffed doll in his powerful hands.

"Charles tripped — he stumbled," said Sir Richard, his tone now smooth, his yellow eyes gleaming. "The effect was like so." He kicked her right ankle sharply. Miss Phipps

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involuntarily withdrew it and was left standing on one foot. Sir Richard then stooped. He seized her left ankle, he heaved, he threw.

Miss Phipps plunged over the railing.

Her glasses fell off. She grabbed at the ironwork and managed to secure a hold. Sir Richard kicked at her knuckles. Miss Phipps, wishing she weighed less, hung on grimly. Sir Richard tried to kick her, but fortunately the pattern of the ironwork was too close to let his foot through. It was all most unpleasant. With an exclamation Sir Richard rushed away into the drawing-room.

"Help!" shouted Miss Phipps at the top of her voice. "Though it's no use calling for help to that sweet silly Elizabeth," she thought, and on an impulse she screamed, "Catherine! Catherine!"

Sir Richard came back with a footstool in his hands. He leaned over the railing, the footstool raised high, and prepared to smash it down on Miss Phipps's head. Miss Phipps, looking up into his frenzied face, could not decide whether to let go her hold and fall, or hang on and wait for the blow from the footstool; but an instinctive tenacity caused her to clutch the railing tightly.

Then suddenly another face appeared beside Sir Richard's distorted mask. It was a perplexing face, reflected Miss Phipps, for it was like the face of Georgiana Bingham and yet not quite like it. It resembled Georgiana's in feature, in coloring, in intelligence, in honest plainness, in troubled integrity; but this face was urban where Georgiana's was rural. It was made up with cosmetics, and had a sophisticated haircut, and its owner, though quietly and inexpensively dressed, wore an essentially London black frock, utterly unlike Georgiana's country prints.

("I suppose," thought Miss Phipps in a dream, "that this is Catherine, that at long last this is Cissie.")

"Leave her alone, Richard!" cried this newcomer strongly, laying her hand on the madman's shoulder.

Sir Richard shook it off and turned on her with a savage snarl. The action threw him off balance, and with an awful cry he staggered, then fell over the railing, and the footstool and Miss Phipps fell with him.

Miss Phipps, however, fell on top and was unhurt save for a few bruises. Sir Richard, underneath and horribly entangled with the legs of the footstool, had broken his neck and was dead.

The police had at last gone, knowing all that Miss Phipps knew about the Quinberry-Coulcy case except her real motive for tracking down the telegram, which she thought it unnecessary to mention. She now rested on a white settee in the Quinberry drawing-room, bandaged in various portions of her person. Elizabeth was in bed upstairs, after a sedative administered by the Quinberry family doctor. Catherine sat beside Miss Phipps, pouring out coffee.

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"Don't tell me," said Miss Phipps, accepting a second cup. "Let me work it out for myself. You're another of the Bingham sisters."

"Yes. There were four of us. We used to say, jokingly, that there were two Binghams with beauty, and two with brains."

"The eldest and the youngest, Caroline and Elizabeth, were the beauties."

"Yes. They resembled my mother, you see."

"You and Georgiana take after your father and have the brains."

"Something like that."

"I ought to have deduced a fourth sister," said Miss Phipps, shaking her head.

"I don't see how."

"My dear, I should have remembered the wreath. The card said: *Canon and the Misses Bingham.* Misses. Plural. But Elizabeth, being married, was no longer Miss Bingham, and Caroline was dead, so there must have been another Miss Bingham beside Georgiana. I believe Hannah Carton was just going to mention you, too, now I come to think of it," said Miss Phipps thoughtfully. "Miss Georgiana and Miss Catherine both work for their living, she was about to say, when the bar opened and I stupidly fled." She took a sip of coffee and asked diffidently, "So you are Cissie?"

"Yes."

"And you sent me the telegram?"

"Yes."

"But I had it fixed in my mind that the anonymous spray of yellow roses had been sent by Cissie," said Miss Phipps.

"You were quite right. I wanted to send a tribute of my own, apart from the wreath I shared with father and Georgiana. You see, I always loved Charles Coulcy," said Catherine Bingham quietly. "He never took any notice of me, of course — he never had eyes for anyone but Caroline. I didn't grudge him to her, because she deserved him. But I couldn't bear that devil Richard Quinberry killing Charles and getting away with it. I was in the house that night — I had a standing invitation to dine here, because Richard thought I acted as a kind of chaperon to Elizabeth against Gerard."

"You were in the house and heard Charles fall?"

"Yes. He wasn't drunk. He was made to trip over a string — I'm sure of it. Elizabeth and I rushed into the room when we heard the crash, and I saw Richard putting a neat coil of string into his pocket. But can you imagine what he would have done to Elizabeth if I had spoken of the string to the police?"

"I can indeed," said Miss Phipps fervently. "And you had just been reading *The Mouse and the Lion* and saw yourself as Cissie?"

"I was very familiar with the book," said Catherine after a slight hesitation. "I had even written letters about it."

"Are you a regular reader of my work, or was it just an isolated chance

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which led you to *The Mouse?*" purred Miss Phipps, deliciously flattered.

"Miss Phipps, you still haven't *quite* worked it all out," said Catherine. "Didn't my voice sound at all familiar to you when you heard it on the balcony this evening?"

"As a matter of fact it did," admitted Miss Phipps. "But I attributed that to its family resemblance with your sisters' voices. Have I ever heard your voice before?"

"Yes."

"Where? Tell me quickly," urged Miss Phipps. "Don't let me burst with curiosity.

"I'm Mr. Richard Bookey's new secretary," said Catherine Bingham.

WINNER OF THE $1000.00 FIRST PRIZE IN STORY POPULARITY CONTEST

The $1000.00 First Prize money in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine's* Story Popularity Contest was awarded to John D. Otis of the Bronx. One thousand other winners in this nation-wide popularity poll have been awarded book prizes.

The contest required that the entrants make up a list of their favorite six stories in the February issue of EQMM, in the order of their preference. The winning choice was the one which came closest to the order of popularity as determined by the votes of a selected cross-section of the readers.

Mr. Otis, 42 and a native New Yorker, is a purchasing agent for a New York firm, the father of two young children — and has been an avid mystery fan for many years.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Theodore Mathieson's "The Hollow Family" and Henry Slesar's "A Victim Must Be Found" are two of the twenty-two "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Eleventh Annual Contest — last year's contest that set an incredible new record for the number of "first stories" purchased by EQMM in a single year. Yet while both these stories represent the authors' first efforts at writing fiction, both also represent the authors' "second stories." Let us explain . . .

Mr. Mathieson had long been interested in the old emigrant trail — he had won honors in history at the University of California — and on vacations with his son, they actually retraced parts of the trail. It occurred to Mr. Mathieson that trail history would make an unusual background for a mystery story. So he began to write "The Hollow Family." But when he was finished with the first draft, he was not completely happy with his work. So, having taken the plunge into writing fiction, Mr. Mathieson went on to a second story — a tale of science fiction.

Now, it happened that Mr. Mathieson submitted his second story for publication ahead of his first story, which he still thought needed more work; and it happened that his second story was promptly purchased by our good friend Howard Browne of Ziff Davis. This second story by Mr. Mathieson appeared in the January 1956 issue of "Amazing Stories," under the title of "Alias Jane Doe." Encouraged by his first sale, Mr. Mathieson then returned to his first story, rewrote it, and submitted it to EQMM's Eleventh Annual Contest. Thus "The Hollow Family" is really the author's "first story," although his second story to be published.

Mr. Mathieson is in his early forties, married, and has three children, two girls and a boy. At the time we bought his first story, Mr. Mathieson had been teaching English for fourteen years in the public high schools of California. Previously, and even while he has been teaching, Mr. Mathieson held as widely (and wildly) diverse a series of lowly paid positions as any writer with a Jacob's-coat background of vocations and avocations — including running an elevator, wrapping packages in a department store, painting fish gates in a cannery (now there's a story we would like to hear!), keeping account books in an oil refinery, packing beer bottles into boxes, writing advertising copy, selling books at Paul Elders in San Francisco, working on radio programs for KPO, and directing and producing plays for summer theatre repertory in Grass Valley, California.

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"The Hollow Family" has the air of American folklore. It is the tragic tale of pioneer country, of feuding families, of passion and violence — and of a "warped and brooding spirit."

THE HOLLOW FAMILY

by THEODORE MATHIESON

As KATHY AND I CAME OUT OF THE abandoned ranch house a cloud shut out the sun in the lustrous Wyoming sky, and I felt a sudden chill of fear. In the cloud shadow I caught for the first time the true atmosphere of the ranch set in the hollow, cold and forbidding, almost like a pervasive odor, of tragedy. I never pass Donner Lake in the Sierras without the same feeling coming right out of the rocks at me. Dreadful things must have happened here.

We had come to this tragic spot, my wife and I, over the pioneer trail from Independence, Missouri. Trail enthusiasts both, we had been out during May and June, checking our personal experiences against observations of the pioneers taken from their journals and letters, and gathering material for a text I could use with my lectures at Buxton College in California.

Most of the way out to Wyoming, Kathy and I had done our field work alone, often driving six or eight hours at a stretch, occasionally in the very ruts of the trail itself. We had climbed Courthouse Rock and camped at Scott's Bluff and had even waded and swum some of the old fording places on the drab and depressing North Platte.

When we reached Wyoming, however, we took advantage of a letter of introduction to Althea Carson in Cheyenne whose books, we knew, guaranteed that she knew the emigrant history of her state probably better than anyone else alive.

We found her, a fascinating, active woman of nearly seventy with white hair, a trim figure and the bluest eyes I've ever seen. She was living alone in a small adobe ranch house just north of town. She had sold all her cattle and lived quietly now, employing one hired man to take care of the ranch and the horses which she loved.

"Land sakes, you two are the answer to a prayer!" she told us over supper that night, her amazingly youthful eyes dancing. "I haven't done a bit of roaming on the trail since my husband died two years ago. I'm simply starved for a sight of it. Let's go!"

For all of her 60-odd years, Althea proved an indefatigable guide and she soon wore us out. Her connections were fabulous and our notes grew fat as we heard stories from the descendants of pioneer families. Many of

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them still lived on ranches established by grandparents who, fed up with the hardships and dangers of the trail, had left the wagon train on the Platte and settled close by.

Going to the state line, the three of us traced the trail from Torrington to Fort Kearney — always under Althea's illuminating leadership. Her understanding of the hardships which were characteristic of certain geographical localities was amazing — indeed, little short of psychic, I thought. She seemed to sense the mood which must have prevailed among members of the wagon trains at particular places and seasons. It was almost as if she herself had passed this way a hundred years ago!

Time and again along the trail she would stop and point a sure finger to the right or left, where there seemed to be no sign whatever of a cemetery or graves.

"They buried somebody there," she would say. "No markers, you know. Only three that I know of on the whole trail which *are* marked."

"But how do you see them?" Kathy asked perplexed.

"Grave plants. They bloom this time of the year wherever the soil has been turned over. Find them for yourselves, now."

But we weren't as successful as Althea.

She was a perfect guide, except for one thing — her incorrigible habit of going off on a tangent. She would break off a perfectly lucid explanation and suddenly become silent. Then she would dart ahead of us, motioning us to follow, and end up at some new landmark, the significance of which she would elucidate volubly.

One such incident disturbed me more than usual — possibly because I had not wanted to leave the spot so soon.

We had descended the bluffs called Register Cliffs which lie directly across the river from Guernsey, and were examining the hundreds of names carved into the soft stone surface there.

"They didn't carve their names here for the fun of it," Althea was saying as she ran her hands over the names cut into the stone. "It was to give reassurance to the friends and relatives who would come by, maybe a few weeks later — to let them know that they were still alive and well. Look at all them. Richardson, Unthank — his grave lies fifty miles up the river — Quincy, Johnson, Price —"

Then she drew back as if the surface of the cliff had suddenly burned her hand and started howking back up the trail to where we had parked our cars, turning only once to urge us to hurry.

A mile or two westward we got out of our cars again and continued on foot through an amazing pass running shoulder height through a sandstone hillock. A few hundred yards beyond, Althea stopped and held up her hand; then stooping under the cedar bough, she guided us to a faint foot trail that led up to a low ridge.

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For the first time Althea seemed to lose her way. The trail ended in a narrow canyon that had been blocked by slides from the ridge and a good-sized pine grew right in our path. From here Althea scrambled off to the right, telling us to wait where we were, but she was back in an instant and motioning us ahead.

Practically pushing Kathy up the last few feet, we reached the ridge to see the land slope down into a hollow which contained the weathered buildings of a ranch. Farm machinery dotted the fenced inclosures. An ancient automobile stood nearby as if someone had left it there for only a moment. The house was of roughly squared logs, as were also the barn and several of the sheds. The buildings were scarcely higher than their own doors and were backed up against the earthen banks of the hollow so that they might be finished off in the rear as dugouts.

"Hadn't we better ask if we're trespassing?" Kathy asked.

"There's nobody to ask," said Althea and led the way to the house and entered it. She was right. The house was furnished, but untenanted. There was the smell of small animals that had moved in long ago. A calendar on the wall said 1913.

"There hasn't been anybody here for twenty-five years!" Kathy said, blowing the dust off an old Bible. "They must have just walked out and left it! Why?"

"You're supposed to be historians," Althea said curtly, her blue eyes darkening. "Suppose you look around for some source material."

For some reason her tone challenged me, and giving Kathy a nod we set to work. Althea watched us for a while, then wandered outside.

Look as we would, we could not find a single letter or personal document in the place until we came, far back in a section which had been dug out of the earth, on a cobwebbed trunk with a tight-fitting lid which we found unlocked. It was full of women's clothing, nicely ironed and folded, house linen uncreased and clean, and down at the bottom, almost as if it had been overlooked, a single letter without an envelope.

It was also dated 1913 and had been written to someone called Marie who had been a schoolteacher. The writer, a woman and evidently an old school chum of Marie's, congratulated Marie on her recent marriage and asked if she would be permitted to continue teaching school. The rest of the letter told in very proper language of a romantic episode in the writer's life, and that was all.

"Marie must have been young, to judge by the tone of her friend's letter to her," Kathy said speculatively.

"And she was married. She probably lived here — in this house — with her husband."

We spent another half hour searching, but we could uncover nothing further of a personal nature. A name had once been written on the inside of the old Bible, but it had been

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scratched out, probably with a needle or the point of a knife.

As we came out of the house an idea hit me and I stopped Kathy.

"Twenty-five years," I said. "And no one has broken so much as a window or a piece of furniture. This place is not so remote as all that."

"It's not too easy to get to," Kathy said ruefully, rubbing a blob of mud from her skirt.

"I think this place is known in this locality, and for some reason people have stayed clear of it."

It was several minutes before we found Althea sitting in the sun on a crumbling split-rail fence, with her eyes closed and her fingers twirling a tiny yellow flower. We told her what we had discovered and how I felt about the place.

She nodded.

"Yes, a man and wife lived here. Everybody in these parts knew about them, and after they — left — no one would come near the place. This hollow has always been bad medicine — even long before the settlers came. The Sioux always bypassed it."

She paused; then seeming to sense our tacit desire to hear more, she continued.

"I've been unable to find the legend that accounts for the blight on the hollow. The Indians usually have one to explain such a thing. But enough happened here after the white man came to justify its bad name.

"You see, this place is rightfully part of the trail history. It was settled by the Prices, one of those families who got fed up with the wagon train and decided to sit tight where they were. Their name is down there on Register Cliff — perhaps you noticed it. There was pa and ma and two sons, and they started this farm back in the late fifties. They were a strange family — terribly proud, religious, and fanatically intolerant. There was a cruel streak in them too — today we'd call it sadistic.

"Well, it wasn't long before the Prices were feuding with a McDonald clan across the river. The story goes that Adam Price, the younger son, made advances to the McDonald daughter and then shot her brother, McDonald's only son, when he tried to interfere.

"McDonald got his brother, a close friend, and a hired man and they set out one moonlit night to wipe out the Prices. But the hollow family was ready for them. In the shooting that followed, old McDonald was killed along with his brother, and the friend and the hired man were mortally wounded. Pa Price was killed, too. And as revenge for this, the two Price boys inflicted torture on the two wounded men that would have made Sioux surgery look gentle. Then they loaded the bodies on a cart and dumped them in front of the door of the McDonald house for the wife to find. The country was still sparsely settled then, the McDonald family had been almost wiped out, so there was nobody to continue the feud. But the people around didn't forget.

"Years passed. Ma Price finally

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died, and the older brother went on farther West and Adam stayed, working the farm alone. Then in his late forties he got married.

"His wife bore him a son, and two years later she committed suicide. She went out one night to that shed by the side of the house there and blew her brains out with a forty-five. Her husband gave out that she had just gone crazy from loneliness. I'm sure it was living with him that drove her to it."

I followed Althea's gaze towards the dingy shed which now leaned at a crazy angle away from the house. The passionate, warped, and brooding spirit of the Prices seemed to settle even heavier over the ranch. Kathy seemed to feel it too, because she put her arm in mine and moved closer to me.

Althea nibbled thoughtfully at the little yellow flower, then spat it out as if it were bitter. She continued slowly:

"Adam went on living on the farm with his son, and the two of them were shunned by all the neighboring ranchers. The son, Daniel, however, grew up handsome and strong, and when his father died he kept right on with the farm. When he was thirty, around 1910, a young schoolteacher came to these parts. Daniel took one look at her and decided that his education had been seriously neglected. Since he could neither read nor write, he started to go to school with the youngsters.

"People were quick to warn Marie as soon as she began to appear with Daniel at square dances and church picnics; but Marie paid no attention. Daniel appeared gentle and kind, and most adoring, and she felt that he had been unfairly treated.

"Well, Marie finished her first year of teaching and then married Daniel and went to live on the farm. Almost at once she found that his gentleness and apparent shyness had been false. Actually he was excessively demanding, brutal, and insanely jealous.

"He wouldn't let her leave the farm to go into town. He took away the books she loved to read because they took her mind off him. And when she began to withdraw her affection he started drinking again. It was known, too, that he beat her frequently.

"But Marie was not like Daniel's mother. When the crisis came, as it had to eventually, she turned the gun not against herself, but against him. She buried him — somewhere on this farm, I suppose — walked away and never came back. Nobody knows what ever happened to Marie Price, and I guess nobody cares now."

Althea stopped speaking and shading her eyes from the sun with her hand looked carefully around the ranch.

"And I suppose you are right," she added. "There's not a window broken. People around here still haven't forgotten the Prices."

Althea and Kathy and I went on with our trail exploration the following day. We crossed the bridge at the

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old ferry at Caspar, and followed the cut-off to Independence Rock where the trail met and forded the Sweetwater. There Althea left us to visit, she said, some friends in Rawlins.

Missing her expert guidance keenly, Kathy and I went on following pioneer traces through June and into July, and then I had to get back to Buxton in time for the opening of the college in August.

During the semester our trail book was published, and in it was an account of the Price tragedy, just as Althea had told it to us. The book had a good sale.

The following summer Kathy and I went on the trail again, following the steps of the Walking Sands Company down through Utah, Arizona, and into Death Valley. In October of that year we learned through friends that Althea Carson had died in Cheyenne, after being thrown from a horse. Kathy and I were deeply moved; we had grown fond of Althea in the short time we had known her, and had exchanged letters up to a month before her death.

Two years after the three of us had explored the Black Rock section of the trail in Wyoming, I had occasion to drive past that way again, alone. Kathy had gone by train to Joplin and I was on my way east to pick her up. I came to the Caspar bridge and on a sudden impulse I turned off the highway onto the trail and headed for the hollow.

I had a little trouble finding the foot trail again, but finally I pushed my way, panting and sweating, over the edge of the ridge. I stopped in surprise. The house was gone — burned to the ground. The automobile was still there and so were most of the out-buildings, although a couple had collapsed, and the whole place seemed to have an even more poignantly brooding air than before.

I picked idly among the cold charred timbers — the destruction had been thorough — and then I noticed that the dug-out section behind the house had collapsed, probably burying the old trunk under it. I felt somehow that this was right — the trunk should have been buried long before.

"You know this place?" a man's voice spoke close to my side.

I guess I must have jumped. The last thing I expected was to find another person in this deserted hollow. I turned and saw a tall, white-haired old fellow in a soft Stetson, blue shirt, and jeans, resting in the shade of a lilac bush.

"Why, yes, I guess I do," I said. "I know of the Prices who used to live here long ago."

"You come from these parts, son?" The patriarch looked up at me with a friendly twinkle.

"I'm from California."

"How come you know about the Prices, then? That's a pretty localized piece of history."

I told him then about our explorations and our published book.

"So you're the fella that wrote that book. I read it, you know, a while

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back. Matter of fact, it got my interest up in this place again. Decided to walk out this way and have a gander at it. You say the house was still standing when you were here before? Lightning must have struck it since."

The old fellow put out his foot and kicked at the cinders idly.

"One thing I don't understand, though. Where you got that story about Daniel Price — the one that married the schoolteacher."

"From the same place I got the story about the feud and the suicide," I said.

"Oh, that part is true enough. Everybody around here knows about the Prices, and what you wrote in your book was perfectly right. Except about what happened to Daniel and Marie."

"You speak as if you knew them."

"I was at their wedding. Marie and I always got along fine. We were both interested in trail history. She used to get up early in the morning and go out alone on horseback along the trace; it wasn't considered fittin' for a woman to do that in those days, but Marie was a pretty spunky girl — and smart, too. Too smart for that drunken sot she married."

"Then how was my story wrong?"

"I didn't say it was *wrong*. I'd say that's probably what did happen between 'em. But how come that you, an outsider, know about it? The most we ever knew around here is that one day they weren't living here any more. We never did find out just what happened to them."

I forget now what I said to the old man. I scarcely remember anything but stumbling down the hill to my car and the vivid pictures of Althea Carson in my mind . . . Althea jerking her hand away from the name of Price on Register Cliffs . . . Althea leading us confidently up a path that hadn't been used in thirty years . . . Althea telling us all about what had happened to a married couple — *a story nobody else knew!*

But the picture that persists in my mind is that of Althea, no longer the fresh young spunky schoolteacher, but now an old woman sitting in the sun on a crumbling split-rail fence, with her eyes closed and her gnarled fingers twirling a yellow grave flower.

In the case of Henry Slesar's "A Victim Must Be Found" it can be said that literary lightning struck twice in the same place and that homicidal history repeated itself. For Mr. Slesar's experiences were almost identical with Mr. Mathieson's!

Early in 1955, while the author was at home convalescing from an illness, he got the irresistible impulse to try his hand at fiction. As Mr. Slesar himself put it, He Who Reads Thinks He Can Write; and so he pounded the typewriter keys and achieved the first draft of "A Victim Must Be

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Found." Mr. Slesar liked his first draft quite well and was about to submit it to his "favorite mystery magazine (EQMM, of course)" — Mr. Slesar's own words, we hasten to explain — when, to quote the author again, he "had an attack of write-fright or tyro-tremens" — with the result that Mr. Slesar's first story went into a drawer of his desk.

But the writing bug had bitten him, so Mr. Slesar went on to a second story — and, like Mr. Mathieson, he chose a science fiction theme. Lo and behold (again as in Mr. Mathieson's case) the science fiction story sold promptly — to a magazine called "Imaginative Tales." (Is there a moral to be derived from these twin chronicles?) The first sale was enough inspiration to cause Mr. Slesar to dust off the draft of his chronologically first story, do some rewriting and polishing — and lo and behold, EQMM bought it! Thus Mr. Slesar's first story turned out to be his second sale, and his second story his first sale — or, as the author said to us, "it's a twist — but who's complaining?" Certainly EQMM is not!

Mr. Slesar is in his late twenties. From 9:00 to 5:00 he bears the imposing title of Vice-President and Creative Director of the advertising agency, Robert W. Orr & Associates, Inc. The agency's accounts range, to quote the author again, "from beauty to duty: from Jergens Lotion to the National Guard."

We think you will agree that "A Victim Must Be Found" is a remarkably good "first story," with acute observation, restrained style, and frighteningly convincing characters. We hasten once more to let the author speak for himself: the theme of "A Victim Must Be Found" is wholly imaginary; Mr. Slesar loves his wife.

A VICTIM MUST BE FOUND

by HENRY SLESAR

THE LOOKS HURT MOST. THE QUIZZICAL one from Dennis, the Account Supervisor. The knowing, falsely sympathetic one from Hargrove, the head Art Director. The amused, poor-henpecked-slob look from Mead, Research man of the advertising agency.

Bill Hendricks looked disapprovingly at his secretary. "I told you not to interrupt me," he said. "Tell Mrs. Hendricks I'll call her back."

"She said it was very important, Mr. Hendricks." Her own face registered neither approval or disapproval.

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Hendricks scraped back his chair. Dennis waved permission to leave. "It's all right, Bill," he said emotionlessly. "We're almost through here, anyway."

"I'll be right back," Hendricks promised.

He went to his office. The receiver was lying on the blotter, and when he picked it up he could almost feel the presence of his wife quivering inside the instrument.

"Karen? For God's sake!" he snapped. "I was in a meeting. I've told you a thousand times —"

"Don't shout at me." The metallic reply was automatic. "It's almost 4 o'clock and I've just *got* to know . . ."

"Know what?"

"About dinner — what do you suppose? You said you'd call me at 3. What do you think I am, a mind-reader?"

Hendricks squeezed the telephone receiver. He pulled out the tangled wire and inched his way around the desk and into his swivel chair. With his free hand he reached absently for a pencil and stabbed at a memo pad, the point breaking and rolling off the desk.

"Now listen to me, Karen," he said in controlled tones, looking at the open doorway. "You've just got to stop yanking me out of meetings this way. A million dinners aren't worth it, do you understand?"

"I'm not going to argue with you over the phone." Karen spaced the words carefully, in that annoying way she had. Hendricks gritted his teeth.

"I'm not arguing," he said. "I'm telling you. You're making me look like a complete fool —"

"Darling, you give me too much credit."

Hendricks started to hang up. But he jerked the telephone back from its cradle just in time.

"I'm not coming home tonight," he said.

"Goodbye," said Karen.

"Goodbye!"

He slammed the receiver down too loudly, and looked up guiltily at the doorway. His hands were shaking, so he shoved them into the pockets of his jacket and leaned back in the chair. There were low muttered sounds in the hallway outside, and he realized that the meeting had broken up. He was glad of it.

Mead popped his head into the office.

"Get your call okay?" he smiled.

"Yeah," said Hendricks.

"Nothing much happened after you left. The old man read over the decisions of the plans board — that's about all. You took notes, I expect."

"I made a list," said Hendricks. "Must have left it in the conference room —"

Mead held up a yellow pad with ruled blue lines. "This it?" he grinned.

"Yes, that's it," said Hendricks. He caught the pad from Mead's easy toss. "Thanks a lot, Ralph."

"Nice-looking notes," said Mead, hanging around. Hendricks pre-

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tended that he was immersed in the long lines of script on the pad. "Nice and neat," said Mead. "You ought to be in Research, Bill."

"I have to take notes. Got a lousy memory."

"Yeah," Mead said. There was a vacant sort of satisfaction in his round face, and he stood in the doorway, rolling back and forth on the balls of his feet. What was he waiting for? Hendricks thought angrily.

"Drink tonight, Bill?" Mead said finally. "Harry, Lew, and I are going downstairs. Join us?"

Hendricks shook his head. "No, thanks. Got some things to clear up before I go home. This bakery account of mine is in one hell of a mess."

"Sure," said Mead. "Okay, Bill. See you Monday, right?"

"Right," said Hendricks.

He sighed when the research man was out of sight, and then, as if to justify the refusal he had given him, buried himself in his notes.

The minutes ticked past 5, and the office sounds slowly diminished. The secretaries bustled into their going-home costumes, their laughter shriller and gayer than usual, for this was Friday afternoon. There was the inevitable jocularity at the elevators, and the isolated laughter of a small after-hours group in some cubicle on the floor. Then they, too, went their way, and the cushioned silence so peculiar to a deserted skyscraper office surrounded Bill Hendricks as he sat in his chair, staring blankly at his own tight scrawls on the yellow pad.

He mused that way for some ten minutes, then snapped out of it with a start. He looked at the pad again, and the detailed instructions he had noted during the conference now seemed strangely meaningless and unimportant. He dropped the pad, and pushed it away from him loathingly. Then he took a key from the top drawer and unlocked the deep file drawer to the bottom left of his desk.

A thin manila folder was all that was in the drawer, and its contents were still another kind of notes.

Bill Hendricks read them over with grim pleasure.

1. Nagging at me every damn night.
2. Spending $500 on a coat she didn't need.
3. Calling me a liar in front of my friends.
4. Throwing out a good set of golf clubs.
5. Ripping my best sports shirt, deliberately.
6. Keeping the car home so that I have to walk or take a taxi from the station.
7. Refusing to go wherever *I* want to go every damn vacation.
8. Making me sleep in the living room whenever she gets mad.
9. Insulting my secretary.
10. Calling Joe Dennis a windbag loud enough for him to hear.
11. Never making my breakfast in the morning.
12. Always hiding the damn ashtrays.

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13. Calling my family a bunch of leeches.

14. Slapping me in the face when I told her the truth about herself.

15. Using my toilet things without permission.

16. Never giving a damn about my clothes — too much starch in the shirts, holes in the socks and underwear.

17. Acting like a damn fool at important business parties.

He came to the last notation and his nostrils flared. Then he picked up his ball-point pen and made an addition to the list.

18. Always calling me up at the worst possible times with phony urgent messages.

He read the list through once more, satisfied at its increasing length. Then he carefully replaced the sheet in the manila folder, returned both to the file drawer, locked it, and put the key back where it belonged.

Then he went home.

"Bill?"

"Later," he said. He went past the living room and up the stairway to the bedroom. There had been a glass in his wife's hand — he had not missed that. Drinking, of course. That was something else. She could really pour that stuff down, all right. Wouldn't be surprised if she lowered the bourbon a good three inches every day he was away at work. That's Number 19, he told himself with sardonic smugness.

He went into the bedroom.

"Twenty," he said aloud, looking around the untidy room. *Her* clothes, mostly; some of his, of course, but whose job was that? It was the least she could do. What else did she have to do all day?

He picked up some kind of lacy underthing from the floor and slammed it onto a chair. He picked up a crumpled covey of facial tissues and threw them into the narrow wastebasket. He lifted up a pair of his trousers, whipped the belt out from the loops, and hung them up in the closet. Then he took off his shirt, rolled it into a ball, and flung it onto the chair that held her lingerie.

He took a heavyweight wool shirt from his drawer and slowly put it on. Then he remembered the gun, and dug through the pile of clothing to see if the box was still there. It was there, of course, tightly sealed with strips of Scotch tape.

"I thought you said you weren't coming home," Karen accused, as he came down the stairs.

"I changed my mind," he said.

"Don't expect any dinner — I took you at your word, you know."

He dropped heavily into an armchair and picked up the evening paper from the table alongside. "I had a bite at the Shack," he said.

"Fried food?" She put down her glass and it rang on the marble top of the coffee table. "Fried potatoes and gravy and things?"

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"Yes, fried potatoes and things!" He rattled the paper in annoyance.

"Well, it's your stomach," she said with a shrug. "I'd offer you a drink, but I suppose that would be more than that colon of yours could stand right now."

"Worry about your own colon," he said savagely, over the top of the paper. "I notice you don't spare it any alcohol!"

"Well, well! *Now* what are we getting at?"

"You know damn well what," he said, the words boiling slowly out his mouth. "You can really knock hell out of a bottle of bourbon these days, can't you? It's the big suburban hobby now, isn't it? A bunch of the girls getting nice and tight while hubby's at work —"

"Bill!"

He dropped the paper to the floor. "Don't give me that outraged innocence routine," he fumed. "Do you think I'm blind? You can tip a jug with the best of 'em, kid, and I know it!"

"Now we're *really* feeling guilty, aren't we?" Karen said. "What's the matter, dear? Had a tough day? Or did you have a fight with that honey-dripping secretary of yours?"

"Damn it to —"

"Oh, don't explode for my benefit!" she said. "Keep it under control, sweetie. If I had only one eye and three pints of bourbon in the bargain I could see what's going on between you and that mealy-mouthed —"

"That's enough!"

"Sure, it's enough!" she shouted. "I think it's enough and plenty! Now you come home and want Faithful Annie to trot out the pipe and slippers and drink her Ovaltine like a good little girl. Well, Faithful Annie's good and sick of it, let me tell you!" She picked up her glass and swallowed the remains of her drink.

Hendricks stood up.

"Where are you going?"

"Upstairs," he said quietly. "I'll be right back."

He went up the stairs deliberately. In the bedroom, he went straight to his shirt drawer and opened it. He lifted out the folded shirts carefully and put them on the bed. Then he took out the tightly wrapped package in the rear of the drawer and brought it with him to Karen's dressing table.

He fumbled with the Scotch tape until he snapped one of his fingernails on the rim of the box. He swore softly, and then put the box on the table and went looking for a pair of scissors.

He couldn't locate them, nor anything else with a sharp enough edge. He tried one of his wife's nail files on the box, but it didn't do the trick.

"Damn!" he said to himself.

He went through all the drawers now, looking for some sort of tool to get to the weapon cozily nestling in its container. He was careless about the search, strewing the jumbled contents of his wife's bureau and vanity table all around the bedroom. It didn't matter now, he told himself. In fact, it would be helpful when he

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told the police about the sudden entrance of the burglar, the hoodlum who had held him at bay and killed his poor Karen . . .

He cursed so loudly at his fruitless hunt that he was afraid his wife would hear him.

Then he spotted Karen's sewing basket, a floral-decorated straw bag he had given her on some long forgotten occasion. He went to it quickly, and turned it upside down, spilling the contents on the rug.

A spool of thread, a thimble, a tape measure, a small revolver, and a piece of folded paper had dropped out and fallen to the floor.

He picked up the paper first, unfolded it, and read:

1. Never talking to me when he gets home at night.
2. Carrying on with his secretary.
3. Never paying any attention to me at parties.
4. Never letting me . . .

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H-M: *Brett Halliday and Helen McCloy in the Fairfield County Fair*
LGO: *Lenore Glen Offord in the San Francisco Chronicle*
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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **A. E. W. MASON,** creator of Hanaud

TITLE: ***The Shining Key***

TYPE: Crime and Mystery

LOCALES: Spain and Africa

TIME: Between World Wars

COMMENTS: *Matt Driver was down to his last peseta, and starving, when he was offered a "curious" little mission. Before it was over, Matt's whole body was like a house ringing with many alarm-bells . . . An unusual story.*

MATT DRIVER SAT ON A BENCH under the palmetto trees of Alicante fingering a solitary peseta in one of his pockets. It is a common saying that no one can really starve in Spain, but Matt had an uncomfortable suspicion that unless he could rub his one peseta into two and then those two into four, he was shortly going to disprove that old saying. It was such a wonderful morning too. It was an affront to the simple sybaritism of Matt Driver that he should be uncomfortable on such a morning.

The month was June. The sunlight sparkled on the sapphire of the Mediterranean and made the stone pavements a blaze of gold; under the palmetto trees it was cool and pleasant; and on the landward side of this avenue, that very good Club and those very good restaurants deployed their invitations.

It would have been so pleasant to have eaten his breakfast in one of them, and thereafter to have helped the sun down the sky with discourse to each newcomer of the stirring and calamitous events which had hurled him out of Morocco and flung him up like a string of seaweed on the beach at Alicante. But Matt Driver had just one peseta in his pocket, and no amount of turning would make it two. Another miracle, however, did happen.

A voice spoke behind his back.

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"Hombre!"

Matt recognized the voice and his heart jumped. It might be that someone wanted him after all. Matt was twenty-three years old and hungry with all the health of those twenty-three years. But he was prudent and he dared not break into his solitary peseta. He turned, however, without haste.

"Señor Fontana," he said easily. "Your duties are over?"

Fontana, a semi-youthful, clean-shaven man in dingy striped flannel trousers and more-or-less white canvas shoes with patent leather tips, flourished a straw hat and sat down by Matt's side.

"For the moment — yes. It is the hour of luncheon."

Fontana was one of those curious nondescripts to be found at Spanish ports, half of him a Marine and an Official, the other half a ship's agent, trader, speculator — a kind of water-side odd-job man. Matt, when he had landed at Alicante from the little Almeria steamer at 7 o'clock that morning, had noticed him at once; and his knowledge of the world, helped by a facility to engage the most complete of strangers at once in intimate conversation, had led him to expose his distressful case and ask for any job of work which might offer. Here already was the reply.

"Señor Driver, I have a friend who would esteem your help," said Fontana. "He invites you to lunch with him so that you may talk over this little affair quietly."

Matt Driver looked at the Clubhouse.

"No, not there," said Fontana, "nor at the Reina Christina Hotel. You would not be quiet there. The little affair is not, it is true, of great importance, but it is — curious."

Fontana dwelt a little on that adjective and, as it were, underlined it by his smile. It was an intriguing word and Fontana's smile was a promising smile. Matt rose to it eagerly.

"Shall I lead the way?" Fontana asked.

"I shall be obliged," said Matt.

The two men walked beneath the palmettos past the Yacht Club and reached a corner where a road joined the esplanade. At this corner a small restaurant stood in a garden.

"The food here is excellent," said Fontana, and at this moment Matt received his first impression that his little affair was certainly curious and might not be so unimportant as his genial friend was pretending. Fontana's friendliness did not surprise him in that friendly country. Any Spaniard will go out of his way to do a stranger a good turn, so long as it actually does not cost him money. But just as they stepped out from the avenue to cross the garden restaurant Fontana laid a hand upon Matt's arm and glanced swiftly up and down the road.

"He has no doubt already arrived," said Fontana, but Matt was not at all deceived by that explanation. The glance of apprehension, the swift grip

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of his arm, now as swiftly relaxed, meant a fear lest they were being watched. Matt was a man of an adventurous spirit and had he needed any other persuasion than his poverty, he would have found it in Fontana's fear. He was still more thrilled when in a corner of the empty garden he was set face to face with a small, slender, elderly gentleman, scrupulously dressed, who wore a little white pointed beard and a white mustache, and appraised him with eyes of steel.

"Let me present you to each other," said Fontana, all pleasure and smiles. "This is my friend Señor Juan Gomez, a merchant of Cordoba."

"Retired," Gomez added.

"It must be pleasant to be able to retire," said Matt, without a hint of disbelief in the truth of Fontana's description.

"On the other hand, it must be still more pleasant to have your youth," replied Señor Gomez, and upon this small change of compliments, Fontana took his leave.

"You will do me the honor to lunch with me, I hope," said the older man; and though the *hors-d'œuvres* of black olives, sardines, and radishes in thin little white dishes arranged on a scrupulously clean tablecloth invited him overwhelmingly, Matt sat down to the meal in extreme discomfort. His clothes were not to blame. It was a rule of Matt Driver's simple philosophy that once your clothes were disreputable the game was up, but that until then hope lurks round every corner. He had been careful to snatch the best of his wardrobe from the holocaust of his fortunes, and he sat here in a blue suit as neat as Don Juan's. No, it was the actual personality of his host which sent little thrills of warning tinkling along all his nerves.

Juan Gomez, however, did not approach his business until the luncheon was finished. Up till then, he was the cultured host talking easily of the great cities to which his business had carried him.

"Cordoba, of course, you know like the palm of your hand," said Matt.

"Since I lived there for so many years," answered the merchant with a shrug of the shoulders. "It is for that reason, no doubt, that I have not talked of its wonders. You know Cordoba?"

"No" — and Señor Gomez began to discourse upon Cordoba until the coffee was on the table and Matt sat with a big Gener cigar between his lips and a glass of Fundador at his elbow. Then Gomez changed his note. They had the garden to themselves. Gomez did not lower his voice, but he spoke abruptly and with an air of relief that all the preliminary banalities were at last at an end.

"Fontana tells me, Señor Driver, that some reverse of fortune, such as may happen to any of us, has for the moment embarrassed you."

"Yes, Raisuli was my friend. With his surrender I lost everything."

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Matt had been born at Larache on the Atlantic coast of Morocco, of English parents long established there. He had never once been in England, though he had crossed many times to Spain. He was in many respects more like a Moor than an Englishman; he had a Moor's cunning, a Moor's good humor, and at the age of twenty, when he found himself with a little money and no parents, he knew his world and its opportunities. He knew it from the Atlas Mountains to the Straits of Gibraltar. He established himself at Alkasar, became Raisuli's agent, acquired flocks which were tended for him by Raisuli's chiefs, and was well on the way to a fortune when Abd-el-Krim from the Riff country upset Raisuli altogether and captured with him all his treasure and belongings. Matt found himself in a day reduced to penury. A few weeks of vain effort to re-establish himself under the new, rigid arrangements of the Spanish consumed the little store of actual money which he possessed. He had fled across the water to Spain, had traveled from Algeciras to Malaga, from Malaga to Almeria, from Almeria to Alicante in search of a fresh opportunity and had come now to his last peseta.

The merchant from Cordoba listened to the story in silence. Then he said: "Romance still lives then, though we poor drab stay-at-homes see little of its color. So swift a rise to fortune!"

"And so swift a decline," added Matt ruefully.

"What you have once done you can do again. Let us think of the swift rise, my friend," and Gomez's voice became silky. "To achieve that your methods must have been a little — shall we say? — informal."

"I had only one method," answered Matt, "— to keep my given word to the minute detail."

"*Claro*," Juan Gomez agreed. "That is what I mean. For to keep your word thus with Señor B. the landed Sheikh, Señor X. the trader might perhaps suffer?"

Matt thought over the problem.

"Yes," he confessed, "I suppose I was never much troubled by the woes of the X's."

Gomez smiled and showed the strong white teeth of a young man.

"We cannot afford to be. I asked you that question, because in this little affair which I shall put before you, I propose to be Señor B. and not Señor X."

Matt nodded his head.

"That is understood, of course."

"Good!" Gomez knocked the ash from the end of his cigar. "I shall ask you to return to Morocco but to a safer district. You know, perhaps, the Kasbah of Taugirt?"

Matt was a little startled.

"In the Atlas Mountains?"

"Yes," said Gomez.

"I know it."

"Perhaps then you know the Kaid of Taugirt himself?"

"I do."

Juan Gomez laughed cheerfully, a curious little tittering laugh.

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"I am lucky, my young friend. I had not hoped for such good fortune."

Matt, on the other hand, frowned dismally.

"Wait a moment, Señor Gomez!" he said abruptly. "I am not so sure of your good fortune. For I gather that the Kaid of Taugirt is to be our Señor X."

"That may be," said Gomez simply.

Matt was torn in two. It was true that in the ordinary way of business he was not greatly troubled by small scruples. But he liked Moors better than Spaniards, anyway, and the Kaid of Taugirt infinitely more than this wicked old scoundrel from Cordoba. He had a picture of the kindly old gentleman keeping guard in his great Kasbah with its turrets and its crenelated walls over one of the high passes of the Atlas, like some great Baron of old days on the Marches. On the other hand, he had only one peseta in his pocket and it would not turn into two.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked sullenly.

Gomez leaned forward and clapped him on the shoulder.

"It is not so serious, my young friend! No harm will be done to anyone — not even to Señor X. Listen! There is a great key in the Kasbah of Taugirt, a great key with many complicated wards. It hangs on a nail, I think, in the big patio."

Matt looked swiftly up.

"It is treasured?"

"It will not be given to you."

"Therefore I must steal it?"

"Let us say that you must not ask for it. Yet I want that key."

"Why?"

Juan Gomez raised his hands in amusement.

"My young friend, consider! If I were prepared to give explanations, I should not have sought for a complete stranger down to his last peseta to help me. Nor should I offer for this little service the high reward which I am willing to pay."

"Yes?" said Matt, looking quickly up. "How much is that?"

"Twenty thousand pesetas. Five thousand now for your expenses, fifteen thousand when you hand me the key."

It was certainly a handsome sum for a little villainy. But Matt had a growing conviction that the villainy was colossal. And not only colossal, but devious and subtle. He was much better informed than the merchant from Cordoba imagined; yet he was as a child in the dark. He contemplated Señor Juan Gomez with respect — and with an inward reservation that he might have to tread a measure with him requiring considerable dexterity.

Gomez took a note-case from his pocket and counted out on the table four notes of a thousand pesetas each and ten notes of one hundred.

"Señor B. keeps his word," he said with a laugh, as he pushed the notes across the table. Matt could not resist them.

"I have to go from here to Casa-

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blanca, from Casablanca to Marrakesh, from Marrakesh up into the Atlas. It will be four weeks before I bring back the — tribute from Señor X. How shall I find you again?"

"You will announce your arrival to Fontana," said Gomez. He paid the bill, ordered another Fundador for Matt, and rose from his chair.

"You will give me ten minutes, if you please," and there was a note of authority in his voice now as though he spoke to a servant. Matt was not offended. He was suddenly afraid. It seemed to him that his whole body was like a house ringing with many alarm-bells. More than the ten minutes had elapsed before he realized that he was smoking a very good cigar in a very pleasant garden, and that June in Alicante was the nearest thing to the Heavenly Choirs which earth could provide.

Matt, however, had eaten of the Cordoba merchant's salt and had taken the Cordoba merchant's money. He traveled by the air-service the next morning from Alicante to Casablanca and a week later climbed one morning with his little mule train up to the great Kasbah of the Kaid of Taugirt. The Kaid rode forward to meet him seated on a high red saddle on a white mule. From afar he cried out in a voice of welcome:

"Mattee!" and he led Matt Driver through his great courtyard into the hall. It was a place of tiles, and pillars painted and decorated, and a fountain playing in a marble basin.

"I saw you from afar with the glasses you gave to me," said the old gentleman, to whom in more prosperous days Matt had presented a pair of Ross binoculars. "Now how can I serve you?"

"I was in Marrakesh," replied Matt, "and I had a wish to see you again, and I had some days to spare from my affairs."

The Kaid's eyes narrowed a little and his face became a mask. But he asked no further questions and busied himself with brews of tea. Four years had passed since Matt had come to these lonely regions and the Kaid discoursed warmly of the French and their friendship. Meanwhile, Matt's eyes wandered around the court and in a little while he saw it, a great shining key like silver, hanging from a nail against a pillar where all eyes might see it.

"You will stay with me for a week? I will have a hunt for the third day. It may be that we shall find a moufflon."

But Matt shook his head.

"Sid Mohammed-el-Hati, on the morning of the third day I must be on my way back to Marrakesh."

"It shall be as you wish," said the Kaid. "Meanwhile my house is yours, Mattee — and all that it holds."

Matt slept in a room of honor with a window opening upon the south and a door leading onto the balcony above the patio. And at 1 o'clock in the morning on the second night of his visit, when the whole Kasbah slept, he crept down into the patio. Through the open roof the moonlight poured down upon the tiles. Even

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in the darkness under the balcony the great key gleamed upon the pillar like a jewel. Matt lifted his hand to it, and a light suddenly shone behind him. Matt turned silently and swiftly. An electric torch exposed him from head to foot, and concealed the man who held the torch. Then the light went out and from the mouth of an alcove the old Kaid spoke very gently.

"You too, Mattee? I told you that my house was yours and all it holds. Why creep down the stairs, then, like a thief in the middle of the night?"

Matt stood rooted to the ground in shame, while the Kaid lit the candles in a branched silver candelabrum which stood upon the floor of the alcove.

"I wouldn't have had this happen for worlds," said Matt slowly.

"Yet it has happened," answered Sid Mohammed-el-Hati. "Let us talk."

He sat down crosslegged upon a long cushion and beckoned to Matt to sit beside him. Matt, however, stood in front of his host.

"'You too,'" he quoted. "Then others have preceded me?"

"One," replied the Kaid. "He came last year, and at this time. He was a stranger. He had a story that he was traveling to Tafilet. He stayed one night. In the morning my key was gone. I sent after him, not on the road forward to Tafilet but on the road backward to Marrakesh. In his luggage my key was found. He was brought back to me. He was very poor, it seemed. He had been offered much money for my key. I let him go."

The old Kaid stopped and once more beckoned to Matt to sit down at his side; and Matt obeyed.

"So you too, Mattee, are now very poor," continued the old man.

Matt nodded his head, and in a voice full of shame he explained the pass to which he had come. The extremes of fortune bring no surprises to a Moor who may be a Prime Minister one day and a beggar without his eyes the next.

"And you want my key, Mattee?"

The Kaid did not wait for an answer. He crossed the moonlit patio and lifted the key from its nail. He brought it back into the alcove and balanced it between his fingers, the light from the candles rippling along its stem and its wards, until it seemed a thing alive which moved.

"Not a speck of rust. Not a flaw in its metal," the old man continued. "Yet it has hung upon that pillar for three hundred and fifty years. We call it the Key of Paradise. For it opens the door of my house in Spain."

Matt had expected just this statement. Here and there about Morocco, in Rabat as in the Atlas, in Fez as in Marrakesh, in the great house of the Nobles hung similar keys. Their ancestors, driven out by Ferdinand and Isabella, had carried their house keys away with them against the time when they would return to Spain and fit them into the locks again. Even now their descendants keep that faith alive.

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"Perhaps even I —" said the old Kaid, and he broke off with a laugh. "But if so, the time must come soon, Mattee, very soon," and he sat absorbed like a man gazing upon a treasure.

"And where is this house of yours, Sid Mohammed-el-Hati?"

"At Elche."

Matt drew a deep breath. He was thinking.

"Yes, this is a bigger piece of villainy than I dreamed of. But I don't understand it. I think I am afraid."

Aloud he said: "Elche is that old Moorish town with the famous date palms thirty kilometers or so from Alicante."

"Yes," said the Kaid. "My house stands on the river bank in a great garden. I have never seen it."

"And who occupies it now?" Matt asked.

"The Conde de Torrevieja," — and with a cry Matt sprang to his feet.

"I was sure of it. Listen, Sid Mohammed! A man calling himself Juan Gomez, a merchant of Cordoba, hired me to steal your key. But I had seen his picture in the newspaper *El Liberal* — an evil little white-bearded rogue, as supple as steel, and not over that name. But over what name I could not remember until now. He is the Conde de Torrevieja."

He stared down at the lighted candles in perplexity.

"He wants the key which opens the house in which during the summer he lives — a second key — safe in a castle of the Atlas Mountains. Why? He wants it secretly too — so secretly that he sends two men to steal it. Why?"

"That, Mattee, you shall find out," said the old Kaid slowly. "For I shall lend you my key. I ask you to bring it back to me as clean and bright as it is now."

He was speaking a parable, as Matt Driver very well understood, and he held up the key between his two hands for Matt to take it.

But Matt's alarm-bells were all ringing more noisily than ever. He saw the old Kaid sitting in his white robes, as motionless as an image. He saw the shining key, the candles burning steadily in the silver candelabrum at his feet; he was aware of this lonely castle in the hills, and of the shadowy pillared hall. But all these things were as unsubstantial as the visions of a dream through which he saw looming up terrifically a veiled and monstrous enigma.

In the end, however, Matt took the key and returned to Alicante, but in a less noticeable way by boat and rail. He slipped quietly into the town one evening, a week ahead of time, and betook himself to a hotel. He had still fifteen hundred pesetas left and he was in no hurry to make contact with Fontana.

"It strikes me," he said to himself, "that Señor B. is giving me the bag to hold, and I should like to see what make of bag it is."

But Matt had no luck. As he strolled under the palmettos in front

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of the Club and listened to the band on that very night, Fontana brushed past him and said in a low voice without turning his eyes in his direction:

"Follow!"

Reluctantly Matt followed in his steps. On the dark side of a Square at the back of the esplanade, away from the lights and the music, Fontana stopped and waited.

"You have been quick, my friend, and I hope successful," he said, as Matt joined him.

"Yes."

Fontana patted him on the back.

"I knew, of course, that you had returned this evening, but I was afraid, since you were here a week before your time. It is encouraging to offer a little help and find oneself so justified. You will be glad to have finished with our small affair and to receive your reward. You shall receive it tonight."

Fontana was all joviality and good will, but he allowed Matt no time for deliberation. He hurried on with his instructions. It was something which Matt was to fetch, he understood. He did not want to know what it was. Heaven be thanked, he was not curious. All that he wanted was now and then to do a good turn for someone on the rocks. The point was, Matt had fetched it and the good Juan Gomez was anxious to have it — was, indeed, at this moment waiting for it at his house in Elche — oh, a mere hop, skip, and jump of thirty kilometers — an hour in a motor-car — and it was not yet eleven.

"But I must go back to my hotel first to fetch —" Matt began and was at once interrupted.

"Yes, yes, no doubt. To fetch what you have to fetch! See how wonderfully everything agrees. While you fetch what you have to fetch, I will get a car and send it here to this quiet Square. At one o'clock you will be back in your hotel, your little mission accomplished, and tomorrow you start life again a capitalist. Bravo!"

Fontana shook Matt warmly by the hand, gazed at him in delighted admiration, and added:

"It will be best that the car should not go to the house. You have understood, of course, that Juan Gomez does not wish for the limelight, the old fox," and with a chuckle he poked Matt in the ribs. "You cannot mistake the house," and he proceeded to give the same description of the house at Elche which Matt had already heard at the Castle in the Atlas Mountains. Though in the one case the details had been given from a traditional knowledge with a real passion of desire; in the other merely as a means of leading a stranger straight to his goal.

"But by the time I arrive there, Gomez will be in bed," Matt objected.

Fontana laid his forefinger cunningly along the side of his nose.

"He will be expecting you. I telephoned to him, as soon as I knew of your return" — and without waiting for any further objections, Fontana stepped out across the Square and

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disappeared into the mouth of a narrow street.

Matt was all for running back to his hotel and putting his head under the bedclothes. But fifteen thousand pesetas were fifteen thousand pesetas. Moreover, his elementary ideas of Law and Justice were based upon the Moorish system as he knew it. He saw no reason why, if he failed Gomez, Gomez should not pay the Governor something, get Matt clapped into prison, and kept there.

So he went to his hotel and fetched the key. He was going to keep his word with Señor B. But he meant also to keep it with Señor X. That key must be returned bright and clean to the Kaid of Taugirt. It must be the instrument of no crime; it must help no dishonorable scheme.

It was 11 o'clock when Matt returned to the Square. Every house was dark, the roadway quite deserted. But the side-lamps of a motor-car were burning on the spot where he and Fontana had stood.

"You are waiting for me? You know where to go?"

"Elche," said the driver.

Matt got in. The car ran parallel with the coast until the salt-pans were reached, and at that point, just after it had turned inland, the engine stopped. Matt sat on a pile of stones at the roadside, watching the pyramids of salt glimmering in the summer night and hoping that the damage was too important for the chauffeur to repair. But in twenty minutes the car was ready again, and it ran so smoothly over the last part of the journey that Matt suspected there never had been any damage at all. What if the accident were just a trick to delay him, so that he might reach the house on the river bank at a moment exactly prearranged? Matt was in the mood to turn back at all costs when the car reached the outskirts of the village, swung to the left, and stopped before the mouth of a lane between hedges which ran downhill to the river bank.

"It is here," said the chauffeur.

"You will wait for me," said Matt.

"Perfectly," replied the chauffeur. He extinguished his lamps as Matt entered the lane. A hundred yards on Matt came upon the house, a solid block of a house with the side towards the river, and huge old date-palms standing up behind high garden walls.

There was not a light in any of the windows upon the lane, not a sound from any room. Matt's feet sank without noise into a carpet of deep sand. He seemed to have come to some derelict, forgotten mansion in a wilderness. Yet somewhere in the depths of it, the disturbing little Count of Torrevieja was waiting for him, a pile of notes under one hand, the other stretched out for the key.

"Well, the sooner I get it over the better," said Matt, and taking the key from his pocket in his right hand he slid his left over the surface of the door in search of the keyhole. The door was a massive barrier of walnut wood and bolts and bars, and it hung

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upon hinges which would stop a battering-ram. Yet, as Matt touched it, it swung open smoothly and noiselessly. A child could have opened it; and it opened upon a cavern of blackness.

Matt drew back with a little gasp. He was now thoroughly frightened. Why was the house in darkness when he was expected? What trick was being played on him by the old spider of a Torrevieja? Why should he carry on in an affair so suspicious? Ah, there was an answer to that question — fifteen thousand pesetas.

Matt stepped cautiously across the threshold and, realizing that he might be visible against the glimmer of the open night to anyone watching within the hall, he closed the door behind him. Then he waited and listened. The house was as still as a tomb.

But at last far away he saw a single perpendicular thread of faint light, as though across a vast hall a door stood ajar. But whether his eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness and the door had always stood ajar, or whether it had only just been silently opened, he could not tell. He moved very cautiously across the floor. He imagined himself to be in some old patio which had been roofed in during a later century and he held out his hands in front of him, lest he should clatter against a pillar. He touched one and then another and so came to the angle in which the door was placed. It opened inwards and at the corner of a room. The chink was so narrow that Matt could see nothing through it but a strip of wall-paneling. He bent his head forward and listened. He heard nothing — not even a sound of breathing. The lighted room seemed as empty as this black cavern of a hall.

Very carefully Matt pushed the door. It yielded but with a tiny whine of the hinges which sent his heart fluttering into his mouth. But even then, no cry, no question was uttered, and there was no sound of any movement of alarm. The room then was empty.

Matt opened the door wide, with an eye upon the crack at the hinges, lest anyone should be concealed behind the panels. But that space was empty; so was the room itself — so far as he could see. But it was a bedroom with a great four-poster bed, round which the curtains were drawn as though someone slept there — or as though someone watched there, holding his breath. Matt's eyes wandered to a long cheval-glass which stood opposite to him in a recess by the bed and became fixed in a stare. He shivered as he looked. It seemed to him that all the ice in the world was trickling down his spine and he felt his hair lift upon his head. He saw himself and behind him, to the left of the door, the dressing-table and upon the dressing-table the solitary candle which lit the room. It gleamed like a star in the depths of the mirror and threw its pale radiance down upon a litter of broken jewel-cases and fragments of jewels: here a chain from which a pendant had

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been wrenched, there a gold setting from which the stones had been roughly forced. There had been a robbery in the house that night. That was why he had found the door open. The thief had noiselessly escaped that way. Then — then — what lay hidden behind the curtains of the bed?

Matt was drawn across the room as a needle is drawn by a magnet. He pulled one of the curtains aside and dropped it again, and stood holding his breath. There was someone there — in the bed — asleep. Yes — no doubt asleep. Yet Matt looked again towards the dressing-table. All that violence, that destruction, must have been accompanied by noise. Matt pushed the curtain aside again. The bedclothes were drawn over the sleeper's head and there was no stir, no rise and fall, as there must be, however slight, if the sleeper breathed at all. Whoever lay in that bed was dead.

Matt approached the head of the bed and his eyes once more encountered the mirror. They met in the mirror another pair of eyes. The Count of Torrevieja, late Juan Gomez, merchant of Cordoba, was standing in the doorway, his eyes bright and sharp as a bird's, a smile of satisfaction upon his lips, a glittering sword in his hand. As Matt turned, the Count raised his voice in a scream.

"Murder! Help! Romero, Felipe, hurry!" and as he screamed he sprang towards Matt.

Matt had no weapon, but as the point of that glittering sword darted towards his breast, he swung the curtain of the bed and caught it in the folds. Already in the room above a clamor arose and there was a rushing of feet. Before Torrevieja could disengage his sword, Matt's hand was in and out of his pocket. It held now the heavy key and with it he struck twice at Torrevieja's head; at the second blow the Spaniard fell.

Matt leaped across him as he lay. Candles gleamed upon the stairway as he raced across the hall. He had no thought of the pillars now. He reached the door. Once more it swung inwards without noise. In a second he was outside. He shut the door as the shouts and the stamping of feet resounded through the hall. He had a moment while the servants rushed into the bedroom — more than a moment perhaps — yes, more than a moment. For they would wait until the old man recovered his senses and could give his orders.

Matt fitted the key into the lock and locked the door. Then he took the key out again and ran. For a while the house was still. Then the cries, the shouts, broke out again, and lights leaped from window to window as though the whole building was in flames. Matt reached the mouth of the lane. His motor-car was gone.

In a few minutes that door would be opened; Torrevieja's men would spread over the country; the whole district would be raised in pursuit of him, the ruined adventurer from Morocco, who had stolen from his friend the Kaid of Taugirt the key of

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Torrevieja's palace at Elche and had crossed into Spain to rob and murder!

Matt ran and ran . . .

Months afterwards a haggard, bearded man dragged himself up to the Kasbah of Taugirt and was admitted to the presence of the Kaid. From his ragged clothing he drew a bright and shining key.

"There is, however, some rust upon it," said Matt. "It is the blood of the worst scoundrel I ever met. I would that I had hit harder and killed!"

"Mattee, explain this to me," said the Kaid, as he hung once more the key upon its nail in the patio. Matt Driver told his story and at the end he produced a cutting from a Spanish newspaper.

"It is now certain that the murder and attempted robbery of the Condesa de Torrevieja must be classed among the unsolved mysteries of crime. It is thought that the murderer must have hidden himself in the house during the day; but the police have no clue to his identity and the fact that he had not the time to take any of the Condesa's jewelry with him makes his discovery now almost impossible. The Conde of Torrevieja, who was prostrated by grief, intends to travel for a year. He, of course, inherited all the great wealth of his Argentine wife."

Matt read the extract to Sid Mohammed-el-Hati and resumed his story:

"Torrevieja meant, of course, to kill me there and then with his sword. If his men had taken me prisoner, I should not have been in any better case. For who would have believed my story? Fontana would have denied it, you may be sure, and the driver of the car too, if he had been found. I was caught in the room with the key of the house in my pocket, and the Countess's jewels in a bag and the Countess murdered in her bed. But since I got away, the Count will not speak of that key. He has all he wants, you see. If I were sought out and brought to trial, and told my story, it would not save me, no, but here and there his enemies might begin to talk, there would come a shadow over his name. So he leaves me alone. But I wish that I had struck harder with your key."

The Kaid looked up at his key.

"Mattee, we are in God's hands," he said.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**MIGNON G. EBERHART**
TITLE:	***Murder in the Rain***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	James Wickwire, elderly banker
LOCALE:	Chicago
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*A girl in a green raincoat . . . rain drenching the park . . . the roar of traffic all around, the rumble of trains . . . and murder . . .*

I ARRIVED IN CHICAGO ON THE Twentieth Century, early in the morning. Blanchard and a young man who proved to be his secretary met me at the train. We lunched at the Saddle and Sirloin Club where I had a steak of incredible excellence. Late in the afternoon I was arrested in connection with murder.

It was a somewhat disconcerting experience. I am a quiet and conservative banker, elderly enough to be a senior vice-president. Also it was my first visit to Chicago.

Like most New Yorkers who seldom venture west of the Hudson, I was extremely curious about our great and rival city. So when Blanchard (Chairman of the Board I had been sent to confer with) told me that the meeting I was to attend had been postponed until the following day, I was delighted.

I settled back in the car while Blanchard's secretary, a thin, dark, elegantly dressed young man, disappeared with my baggage checks, and Blanchard essayed the first of a series of ribbing jokes.

"Your first visit here, isn't it, Wickwire? Well, don't be disappointed if there's no gang murder. We can't have one every day, you know."

He chuckled, his blue eyes laughing in his large pink face, which he was

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wiping vigorously. It was a hot day in late June — hot but dark and rainy so that everything, including Blanchard, seemed to steam. Blanchard wiped his face again. "Lawson will be back in a minute with your bags. Then we'll get out of this."

The young man, Lawson, returned shortly, weaving an alert way through the taxis, with my baggage. The chauffeur found driving space, and we came out into a jammed street. Here a sharp rat-tat-tat blasted my ears. "Pay no attention to that," Blanchard said. "It's only a machine-gun."

Well, a good New Yorker knows the difference between a machine-gun and a riveting machine. However, I smiled politely, and we arrived at a vast hotel towering up into the gray and rainy sky, where the assiduous secretary left my baggage. We then toured the city. Blanchard and the secretary both pointed out business and cultural centers till we had visited the magnificent Chicago University campus and presently arrived at the Stockyards Inn and the steak I have mentioned.

Here, however, Blanchard was obliged to return to his office and turned me over to young Lawson. "North Shore," he said to him. "You know, the works. Stop at the Art Institute. We can't let him miss that. Then Lincoln Park —" he was looking at his watch, fixing a time-table. "By that time he'll want to go back to the hotel for a rest. I'll pick you up, Wickwire, at 5."

Young Lawson nodded. "Yes, sir. Shall I telephone Wilson now?"

"Wilson?"

"To confirm your Monday appointment?"

"Oh." Blanchard seemed slightly put out but nodded. "Certainly." He brooded as the thin young man slid alertly away. "These young men! Too damned efficient. Makes me feel old." He passed a hand over his white hair and said wistfully, "Maybe I *am* old."

I knew too well what he meant and said so, and both of us brooded. However, presently he cheered up. "But there's life in us old boys yet," he said. "By the way, Wickwire, don't mind our jokes about murder. We only do it to shock New Yorkers. Outdo them. Stupid joke really. Matter of fact, Chicago is no worse in that respect than other cities." He eyed me shrewdly, "You don't shock easily, do you?"

"I've lived in New York a long time," I replied not too obliquely, and then young Lawson came back.

After we dropped Blanchard at the bank, Lawson took up the role of guide. First we must visit the Art Institute, which we did, greatly to my pleasure, although Lawson kept looking at a very elegant watch on his wrist and rather hustled me along. When we emerged, he permitted me an extra moment or two. "There's a view from the terrace," he said and guided me along a wide, balustraded terrace and around a corner. There was a view of a wet and dripping park below us. There was also a view of a

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high wall, shielded by shrubbery, behind which there came a crashing rumble and roar which met and joined the roar of Michigan Boulevard at our right.

"Trains," he explained at my questioning glance. "The Illinois Central tracks. The Planetarium is in that direction. I'm sorry you can't see it . . ."

It was beginning to rain again, and the visibility was poor. The wall blocked off one side of the small park which lay immediately below us, and at the end of it a bank, heavy with shrubbery, went up to a street some distance above our level. Across Michigan Boulevard lights made bright patterns outlining the great buildings against the dark sky. "Smog," Lawson said. "Expect you have it in New York. This is one of Chicago's dark days."

A very pretty blonde girl in a brilliant green raincoat rounded the terrace, shot an angry look in our direction as if we had no business there, and went down some steps into the park. I watched her idly until she disappeared into heavy shrubbery at a distant corner where masonry and thick foliage shut off the flash of green. Lawson was continuing, ". . . and there's Orchestra Hall —"

An odd sound struck my ear.

"Surely that was a scream, Lawson," I said.

He gave me a startled glance. "Oh, I don't think so," he said. We both listened. There was certainly nothing now except the heavy roar of traffic along the boulevard, the roar and rumble of trains below the wall.

I was staring at the corner of the wall where the girl in green had disappeared. It *had* sounded like a scream. But as I looked there was a vivid flash of green emerging above the level of the little park. Obviously there were steps there, hidden by the shrubbery. The flapping green raincoat reached the top and hovered there. A green hood blew back, showing black hair. "Dear me," I said, "it's a different girl."

Lawson was saying, "I was about to point out the bronze lions at the Institute entrance. They weigh —" I hadn't missed the lions — nobody could. But I never heard their weight, for the girl still lingered at the top of the invisible steps. I stared at her and then at the thick shrubbery in the corner and said, "I rather think there's something wrong down there. We'd better take a look."

"But — you can't be serious, Mr. Wickwire."

I was very serious, indeed. Another train rumbled and clattered along the tracks below the wall. The girl in green strolled slowly eastward.

I didn't like it. I didn't like any of it. I said, "I'm going down there."

He sprang to attention. "Stay where you are, Mr. Wickwire — I'll see about it." He ran down the steps and along the winding, murky paths.

The rain obscured my vision; the loud clatter and rumble of the train and the traffic were confusing. I pulled my hat lower to keep the rain

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out of my eyes, waited a moment or two, trying to conquer my disquiet, and then followed him. As I approached the corner where the wall projected, I collided with young Lawson, hurrying back to meet me. His face gleamed white in the rain. He cried wildly, "There's a woman! She's dead! What shall I do?"

A train hooted dismally. I shouted, "Call a policeman! Get the nearest traffic cop!"

He gave me another wild look and plunged back toward the terrace. I went on around the corner.

A girl in a green raincoat lay there, her pretty face full in the rain, her green hood framing blonde curls. It was the girl who had passed us on the terrace. Lawson was quite right. She was dead.

I felt her pulse. I saw the bruise on her face. I looked at the crimson patch on her coat. She had been shot. I hadn't heard it. Unless — had I heard what I had unconsciously taken to be a loud backfire? I couldn't be sure of that. But certainly it was a spot extraordinarily well chosen for murder with a gun. The honking and thud of traffic on the boulevard and the cross street above, the roar and clatter of trains behind the wall effectually covered the sound of a gun.

A sense of an imperative need to hurry nudged me. The other woman in green was now rapidly escaping. By the time Lawson and the police arrived she would have lost herself in the shadows of the murky day, never to be found or identified.

The steps she had ascended were now almost beside me. I ran up them and came out on a sidewalk bordering a wide street, heavy with traffic. The train was still rumbling along below me, a freight train, for I glanced over the wall and down upon a thick network of tracks. Then I saw a flash of vivid green in the distance and hurried after it, skirting a vast area of parking space.

Her pace was just slow enough to suggest that I might overtake her and just fast enough to prevent my doing so. Eventually I realized that she was heading back toward Michigan Boulevard, and reached the street in time to see her board a large bus which immediately trundled away northward.

Blanchard's car and chauffeur, waiting somewhere near the Art Institute, would have been useful, but there was no time to return for them. However, an empty taxi came along and I hailed it. "Follow that bus," I said tersely, and the driver of the cab did so.

It was not an easy chore; other buses and automobiles crowded around us. I got my breath and meditated and watched the bus which the driver followed with surprising expertness and docility, rather as if I might thrust a gun in his ribs at any moment.

It was an odd impression — not quite so odd when I caught a glimpse of my face in his mirror. Owing to my drenched hat pulled low over my eyes and some grimy smears from the

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wet and smoke-stained shrubbery, I did have, I must admit, a look of unconscionable villainy. His eyes met mine in the mirror. He blinked and said with extraordinary meekness that it might be a long ride.

It was a very long ride, indeed. We kept behind the bus, taking a risk now and then with traffic lights, and every time the bus stopped I watched for a green coat to disgorge itself, but it never did. We went on and on and on, through a park, along the lake, and on. I wondered how Lawson was making out with the police.

Indeed, I thought of a number of things and I wished I could stop and make one or two telephone calls. I watched the thinning numbers of passengers who emerged from the various bus stops automatically. I roused when at last the bus appeared to be circling back on its own tracks and leaned forward again. "Where are we?"

"Evanston. Bus is starting back to Chicago." The driver twisted around to look at me. "Still want to follow?"

I nodded. The woman in green had not got out of the bus, so she was still there. We started back to Chicago through the early dusk of the dark and rainy day.

It was indeed so dark and foggy that when she did get down from the bus I nearly missed her and I only happened to see the flash of green moving rapidly along the sidewalk. "Stop, stop!" I cried. "How much do I owe you?"

It was a very substantial sum, and the driver seemed relieved to get it. Then he shot a glance at the green figure hurrying along the walk. "For gosh sake," he said in a disgusted way, "a dame," and gave me a look which, even in my haste, I preferred not to interpret. Especially since at that instant the green coat vanished apparently into the bowels of the earth.

I hurried after it and discovered steps going down into a murky tunnel — a pedestrian crossing under the boulevard. I ran through it and came out upon another long strip of park, following the curve of the lake. The green coat was swinging purposefully along a path ahead of me and toward the lake — down to the very edge, in fact, and, as one arm went up in a vigorous, throwing curve, I reached the woman and caught her arm.

She whirled around. There was a short sharp struggle. Then I got a rather singular object in my hand. It was a small hammer, a household tool. But a lethal tool. She was panting and angry. She was a young woman, pretty in a florid and forceful way, with fine dark eyes. "You —" she cried and then screamed at someone behind me. "Arrest this man. He's been following me!" Two large policemen loomed out of the dusk behind me.

One cried, "It's him!" The other laid a heavy hand on my shoulder. "James Wickwire? You're under arrest. We've been hunting for you all afternoon. Every prowl car in the city's been alerted. It's murder!"

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"What's this?" the other policeman demanded and seized my hand with the hammer in it. "*He was going to kill her, too!*"

It was not a moment conducive to composure. I said rather hurriedly that I'd go with them. "But kindly arrest this young woman." I then became aware of the fact that the green coat had again, very simply and quietly, vanished.

There was nothing much that could be done about it. One policeman gripped me unrelentingly. The other made a rather cursory search of the nearby clumps of shrubbery. Dusk dropped down. The woman in the green coat was gone. . . .

At police headquarters my arrival aroused considerable interest. However, I was permitted to telephone to Mr. Blanchard. In the interests of the accepted amenities of speech I will pass over his comments.

In twenty minutes he arrived, with a lawyer, his secretary Lawson, and an apoplectic countenance. In ten minutes more I was given to understand that I was no longer under arrest.

Indeed, young Lawson, after providing me with an alibi, apologized.

Pursuit of me had been entirely a police idea. They had made him describe me; they would not accept his statement concerning me and my identity and my position as an innocent bystander. He was abject and also worried, wiping his white face and eyeing his employer with trepidation.

The rich shade of purple in Blanchard's face deepened. "You're fired, Lawson!"

"Just a minute, Blanchard," I said, "is this young man married?"

"Yes," Lawson said, with an imploring look at his employer.

Married. And doubtless getting an extremely moderate salary.

I turned to the police lieutenant at the desk beside us. "Who was the murdered woman?"

He glanced at a form on his desk. "Identified by the cards in her handbag. Name, Marie Garten. Unmarried. Lived alone — very luxurious apartment. Had plenty of money, inherited. No robbery, so there's no motive there."

I looked at Lawson. "Exactly what happened after I left you?"

He was prompt and exact although still apologetic. "I reported it to the traffic cop. A prowl car got there and then the homicide squad. They removed the body and asked me to make a report at headquarters, which I did. I was obliged to mention you, Mr. Wickwire — I couldn't help it. I didn't know what had happened to you and naturally I was worried, being in a way responsible for you. I told the police you had nothing to do with the murder."

I said to the lieutenant. "How was the young woman murdered?"

The lieutenant replied. "Gun shot. Through the heart."

"Was there a bruise on her face? A bruise which might have caused unconsciousness?"

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He shrugged. "Might have been — if it occurred before she was shot."

I didn't pursue that. It was their problem. I said to Blanchard, "When was the board meeting postponed?"

He looked puzzled. "Late yesterday afternoon. We tried to reach you in New York, but you'd already left."

It answered a very urgent question. It had seemed to be a swiftly improvised murder, yet it couldn't have been that for one does not habitually carry a gun, even in Chicago. But there had been twelve hours to plan and to take advantage of the opportunity that might arise. I said to the police lieutenant, "Did you find the gun?"

They hadn't. Everybody looked at the small hammer on the desk. I felt rather sick, and also deeply angry. It was a remarkably cold-blooded murder. I looked at Blanchard. "Have you ever seen Mrs. Lawson?"

"Huh?" Blanchard looked startled. "Sure. Dark young woman, attractive. Fine black eyes."

I was angry and tired. "I'll go back to my hotel now if I'm permitted to do so. Meantime —" It was strangely difficult, and I cleared my throat before I said it. "There's your murderer. It's Lawson."

Somebody, I think Blanchard, gave a kind of gurgle. I said, "I suggest you get hold of his wife and question her. Find out what Lawson's been spending. He dresses too well for his salary. Find out where he got his money. Get somebody who has seen Lawson and this murdered girl together." I glanced at Blanchard. "I doubt if that telephone call to — Wilson, wasn't it? — was ever really made.

"I rather think that in fact Lawson telephoned his wife, told her their plan had a chance to work. He also telephoned to Marie Garten and made a date to meet her at the exact corner where she was murdered. Miss Garten, however, came upon the terrace and walked past us. She gave Lawson an angry look, but didn't speak to him, nor he to her, so I take it that their association was definitely *sub rosa* — not to be acknowledged if they met while Lawson was, so to speak, on the job — and obviously, that there was a quarrel between them.

"She went to the agreed corner of the wall to wait for him. Meantime, Mrs. Lawson, intentionally wearing a green coat like Miss Garten's, was waiting there for her. Probably she had balked at murder herself, but she knocked out Marie with that hammer to make murder easy and certain.

"Somebody screamed. Since the scream was meant to attract my attention, I think it was Mrs. Lawson. She then went up the steps to a spot from which her green coat would be visible from the terrace where I stood. Naturally I watched."

I took a breath. No one spoke, so I went on. "At that point, what I can only call a certain genius for murder began to operate. I had heard a scream. A different young woman,

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dark-haired, but in a green coat came up the steps. I had to investigate. But Lawson, the always efficient young man, dashed down to do it for me. With excellent timing the woman in the green raincoat drifted rather slowly away. I waited and then followed Lawson who dashed out again from the corner, shouting murder. I told him to call the police. I looked at the murdered woman, and then did what was expected of me: I followed the second woman."

"But the Garten woman was shot," the lieutenant said.

"Oh, yes. Lawson did it. It takes a remarkably short time to pull a trigger. I didn't hear the shot. I was some distance away. It may have been a small calibre—"

"It was—" the lieutenant began.

I continued—"and the loud clatter of the train below covered the sound of the shot."

I looked at Blanchard, who was dangerously swollen and red. I said to the lieutenant, "I had to be got out of the way. I had served my purpose—a witness, an alibi, and more importantly, someone who could not possibly have recognized either Marie or Mrs. Lawson.

"Once I was induced to follow a will-of-the-wisp in green, Lawson had the necessary time to hide the revolver. I don't know where, but it required time. I'm sorry my disappearance obscured the simple, primary facts. Shall we go, Blanchard?"

"Simple," the lieutenant said. "Primary." He roused. "Is this an accusation of murder, Mr. Wickwire?"

I said politely, "Lieutenant, I suggest that you investigate along those lines."

"And hold Lawson," Blanchard said, with a snap of his teeth. "Come on, Wickwire."

At Blanchard's club he ordered two double whiskeys. We drank in deep silence, and I was relieved to see Blanchard's color fade to its normal pink. "They'll phone us here," he said at last. "Waiter—another of the same."

But instead of telephoning the police lieutenant came and, since it was after hours, he accepted a double whiskey.

"Mr. Wickwire was right," he said. "Marie Garten was Lawson's girl friend; she loaned him money. He got into a tight spot on the market. Marie wanted her money back, especially when he began to cool toward her. Marie threatened to tell you the whole story.

"Lawson told his wife, and they decided to get rid of her. He seems to have fixed up the plan. Wanted an alibi, somebody who didn't know either Marie or his wife, and whose word would carry more weight.

"We've got his wife. She won't testify against her husband, but we've got enough. We've got the revolver, by the way—it was wrapped in today's newspaper and checked in the package room at the Art Institute."

He glanced at me. "Once he got you out of the way, Mr. Wickwire, a

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few minutes' delay in reporting the murder wouldn't matter. Who was there to say there had been a delay? . . . Mrs. Lawson must have felt that you had given up and returned to the city. She had to get rid of the hammer." He sighed. "Smart young man — real talent."

"Too smart," Blanchard said.

The police lieutenant turned to me. "What put you onto it, Mr. Wickwire? I mean, I understand about the scream but —"

"The two green coats," I said. "The same color might have been coincidence. But if not, was there a deliberate plan on the part of somebody? And to accomplish what? To make certain of my interest, so I would question the similarity — and be the more likely to follow the second green coat? A subtle suggestion. Did it suggest a subtle plan to lead me away from the scene? But who had brought me to that scene?" I shrugged. "Then everything added up."

Both men looked slightly suspicious. Perhaps they sensed an omission, for Blanchard said, rather dubiously:

"In any event you got the right answer."

The police lieutenant was looking oddly. "I always thought New Yorkers were sort of —" He checked himself, and added soberly, "But you'd do all right in Chicago, Mr. Wickwire," he said.

It was an accolade, a verbal decoration. I took it as such and thanked him.

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Now that we have reached the fourth in our series of detective-crime short stories by Bret Harte, it occurs to us that we have not yet described the man physically. The most famous portrait is the one painted in 1890 by John R. Pettie of the Royal Academy, and it is generally accepted that this portrait shows "the real man." It reveals, for example, Bret Harte's "almost haughty posture" — "the wavy hair half covering the ear" — "the carefully groomed drooping mustaches" so reminiscent of those worn by the miners, desperadoes, and sheriffs of Harte's own West — "the patrician profile with its keen eye and sensitive nostrils" — and, of course, Bret Harte's celebrated dandyism, his "emphasis on clothes": the "richly furred overcoat . . . the shining white cuffs . . . the gloves fitting without a wrinkle . . ."

Contrast Bret Harte's real-life appearance with the imagined appearance of one of his Western characters — the cool customer, for instance, whom you will meet in the story we now give you. He was a small man, and he came through the buckeye bushes on a black horse; he was well armed, enormously assured, could quote authoritatively from the work of Charles Dickens, and his name was definitely not Kearney . . . no patrician dandy riding that old and lonely trail . . .

"WHO WAS MY QUIET FRIEND?"

by BRET HARTE

"STRANGER!" THE VOICE WAS NOT loud, but clear and penetrating. I looked vainly up and down the narrow, darkening trail. No one in the fringe of alder ahead; no one on the gullied slope behind.

"Oh, stranger!"

I looked up, and perceived for the first time on the ledge, 30 feet above me, another trail parallel with my own, and looking down upon me through the buckeye bushes a small man on a black horse.

Five things to be here noted by the circumspect mountaineer. First, the locality — lonely and inaccessible, and away from the regular faring of teamsters and miners. Secondly, the stranger's superior knowledge of the road, from the fact that the other trail was unknown to the ordinary traveler. Thirdly, that he was well armed and equipped. Fourthly, that he was better mounted. Fifthly, that any distrust or timidity arising from the contemplation of these facts had better be kept to one's self.

All this passed rapidly through my

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mind as I returned his salutation.

"Got any tobacco?" he asked.

I had, and signified the fact, holding up the pouch inquiringly.

"All right, I'll come down. Ride on, and I'll jine ye on the slide."

"The slide!" Here was a new geographical discovery as odd as the second trail. I had ridden over the trail a dozen times, and seen no communication between the ledge and trail. Nevertheless, I went on a hundred yards or so, when there was a sharp crackling in the underbrush, a shower of stones on the trail, and my friend plunged through the bushes to my side, down a grade that I should scarcely have dared to lead my horse. There was no doubt he was an accomplished rider — another fact to be noted.

As he ranged beside me, I found I was not mistaken as to his size; he was under the medium height, and but for a pair of cold, gray eyes, was rather commonplace in feature.

"You've got a good horse there," I suggested.

He was filling his pipe from my pouch, but looked up a little surprised, and said, "Of course." He then puffed away with the nervous eagerness of a man long deprived of that sedative. Finally, between the puffs, he asked me whence I came.

I replied, "From Lagrange."

He looked at me a few moments curiously, but on my adding that I had only halted there for a few hours, he said, "I thought I knew every man between Lagrange and Indian Spring, but somehow I sorter disremember your face and your name."

Not particularly caring that he should remember either, I replied half laughingly that, as I lived the other side of Indian Spring, it was quite natural. He took the rebuff, if such it was, so quietly that as an act of mere perfunctory politeness I asked him where he came from.

"Lagrange."

"And you are going to" —

"Well! That depends pretty much on how things pan out, and whether I can make the riffle." He let his hand rest quite unconsciously on the leather holster of his dragoon revolver, yet with a strong suggestion to me of his ability "to make the riffle" if he wanted to, and added, "But just now I was reck'nin' on taking a little *pasear* with you."

There was nothing offensive in his speech save its familiarity, and the reflection, perhaps, that whether I objected or not, he was quite able to do as he said. I replied that if our *pasear* was prolonged beyond Heavytree Hill, I should have to borrow his beast. To my surprise he said quietly, "That's so," adding that the horse was at my disposal when he wasn't using it, and *half* of it when he was. "Dick has carried double many a time before this," he continued, "and kin do it again; when your mustang gives out I'll give you a lift and room to spare."

I could not help smiling at the idea of appearing before the boys at Red Gulch *en croupe* with the stranger;

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but neither could I help being oddly affected by the suggestion that his horse had done double duty before. "On what occasion, and why?" was a question I kept to myself. We were ascending the long, rocky flank of the divide; the narrowness of the trail obliged us to proceed slowly, and in file, so that there was little chance for conversation, had he been disposed to satisfy my curiosity.

We toiled on in silence, the buckeye giving way to chimisal, the westering sun, reflected from the blank walls beside us, blinding our eyes with its glare. The pines in the cañon below were olive gulfs of heat over which a hawk here and there cast a weird and gigantic shadow of slowly moving wings on the mountainside. The superiority of the stranger's horse led him often far in advance, and made me hope that he might forget me entirely, or push on, growing weary of waiting. But regularly he would halt by a boulder, or reappear from some chimisal, where he had patiently halted. I was beginning to hate him mildly, when at one of those reappearances he drew up to my side, and asked me how I liked Dickens!

Had he asked my opinion of Huxley or Darwin, I could not have been more astonished. Thinking it was possible that he referred to some local celebrity of Lagrange, I said, hesitatingly:

"You mean" —

"Charles Dickens. Of course you've read him? Which of his books do you like best?"

I replied with considerable embarrassment that I liked them all — as I certainly did.

He grasped my hand for a moment with a fervor quite unlike his usual phlegm, and said, "That's me, old man. Dickens ain't no slouch. You can count on him pretty much all the time."

With this rough preface, he launched into a criticism of the novelist which, for intelligent sympathy and hearty appreciation, I had rarely heard equaled. Not only did he dwell upon the exuberance of Dickens's humor, but upon the power of his pathos and the all-pervading element of his poetry.

I looked at the man in astonishment. I had considered myself a rather diligent student of the great master of fiction, but the stranger's felicity of quotation and illustration staggered me. It is true that his thought was not always clothed in the best language, and often appeared in the slouching, slangy undress of the place and period; yet it was neither rustic nor homespun, and sometimes struck me with its precision and fitness.

Considerably softened toward him, I tried him with other literature. But vainly. Beyond a few of the lyrical and emotional poets, he knew nothing. Under the influence and enthusiasm of his own speech, he himself had softened considerably; offered to change horses with me, readjusted my saddle with professional skill, transferred my pack to his own horse,

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insisted upon my sharing the contents of his whiskey flask, and, noticing that I was unarmed, pressed upon me a silver-mounted derringer, which he assured me he could "warrant." These various offices of good will beguiled me from noticing the fact that the trail was beginning to become obscure and unrecognizable. We were pursuing a route unknown to me. I pointed out the fact to my companion, a little impatiently. He instantly resumed his old manner and dialect.

"Well, I reckon one trail's as good as another, and what hev ye got to say about it?"

I pointed out, with some dignity, that I preferred the old trail.

"Mebbe you did. But you're jist now takin' a *pasear* with *me*. This yer trail will bring you right into Indian Spring, and *onnoticed*, and no questions asked. Don't you mind now, I'll see you through."

It was necessary here to make some stand against my strange companion. I said firmly, yet as politely as I could, that I had proposed stopping overnight with a friend.

"Whar?"

I hesitated. The friend was an eccentric Eastern man, well known in the locality for his fastidiousness and his habits as a recluse. A misanthrope, of ample family and ample means, he had chosen a secluded but picturesque valley in the Sierras where he could rail against the world without opposition. "Boston Rancho," as it was familiarly called, was the one spot that the average miner both respected and feared. Mr. Sylvester, its proprietor, had never affiliated with "the boys," nor had he ever lost their respect by any active opposition to their ideas. If seclusion had been his object, he certainly was gratified. Nevertheless, in the darkening shadows of the night, and on a lonely and unknown trail, I hesitated a little at repeating his name to a stranger. But my mysterious companion took the matter out of my hands.

"Look yar," he said, suddenly, "thar ain't but one place twixt yer and Indian Spring whar ye can stop, and that is Sylvester's."

I assented, a little sullenly.

"Well," said the stranger, quietly, and with a slight suggestion of conferring a favor on me, "ef yer pointed for Sylvester's — why — I don't mind stopping thar with ye. It's a little off the road — I'll lose some time — but taking it by and large, I don't much mind."

I stated, as rapidly and as strongly as I could, that my acquaintance with Mr. Sylvester did not justify the introduction of a stranger to his hospitality; that he was unlike most of the people here, — in short, that he was a queer man.

To my surprise my companion answered quietly: "Oh, that's all right. I've heerd of him. Ef you don't feel like checking me through, or if you'd rather put 'C.O.D.' on my back, why it's all the same to me. I'll play it alone."

What could I oppose to this man's

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quiet assurance? I felt myself growing red with anger and nervous with embarrassment. What would the correct Sylvester say to me? What would the girls, — I was a young man then, and had won an *entrée* to their domestic circle — what would they say to my new acquaintance?

We were beginning to descend. In the distance below us already twinkled the lights in the solitary rancho. I turned to my companion. "But you have forgotten that I don't even know your name. What am I to call you?"

"That's so," he said, musingly. "Now, let's see. 'Kearney' would be a good name. It's short and easy like. Thar's a street in 'Frisco the same title; Kearney it is."

"But" — I began impatiently.

"Now you leave all that to me," he interrupted, with a superb self-confidence that I could not but admire. "The name ain't no account. It's the man that's responsible. Ef I was to lay for a man that I reckoned was named Jones, and after I fetched him I found out on the inquest that his real name was Smith, that wouldn't make no matter, as long as I got the man."

The illustration, forcible as it was, did not strike me as offering a prepossessing introduction, but we were already at the rancho. The barking of dogs brought Sylvester to the door.

I briefly introduced Mr. Kearney. "Kearney will do — Kearney's good enough for me," commented the *soi-disant* Kearney half-aloud, to my own horror and Sylvester's evident mystification, and then he blandly excused himself for a moment so that he might personally supervise the care of his own beast. When he was out of ear-shot I drew the puzzled Sylvester aside.

"I have picked up — I mean I have been picked up on the road by a gentle maniac, whose name is not Kearney. He is well armed and quotes Dickens. With care, acquiescence in his views on all subjects, and general submission to his commands, he may be placated. Doubtless the spectacle of your helpless family, the contemplation of your daughter's beauty and innocence, may touch his fine sense of humor. Meanwhile, Heaven help you, and forgive me."

I ran upstairs to the little den that my hospitable host always kept reserved for me in my wanderings. I lingered some time over my ablutions, hearing the languid, gentlemanly drawl of Sylvester below, mingled with the equally cool, easy slang of my mysterious acquaintance. When I came down to the sitting-room I was surprised, however, to find the self-styled Kearney quietly seated on the sofa, the gentle May Sylvester sitting with maidenly awe and unaffected interest on one side of him, while on the other that arrant flirt, her cousin Kate, was practicing the pitiless archery of her eyes, with an excitement that seemed almost real.

"Who is your deliciously cool friend?" she managed to whisper to me at supper, as I sat utterly dazed

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and bewildered between the enrapt May Sylvester, who seemed to hang upon his words, and this giddy girl of the period, who was emptying the battery of her charms in active rivalry upon him. "Of course we know his name isn't Kearney. But how romantic! And who is he?"

I replied that I was not aware what foreign potentate was then traveling *incognito* in the Sierras of California, but that when his royal highness was pleased to inform me, I should be glad to introduce him properly.

"You're only jealous of him," she said pertly. "Look at May — she is completely fascinated. And her father, too." And actually, the languid, world-sick, cynical Sylvester was regarding him with a boyish interest and enthusiasm almost incompatible with his nature. Yet I submit honestly that I could see nothing more in the man than I have already delivered to the reader.

In the middle of an exciting story of adventure, of which he, to the already prejudiced mind of his fair auditors, was evidently the hero, he stopped suddenly.

"It's only some pack train passing the bridge on the lower trail," explained Sylvester; "go on."

"It may be my horse is a trifle oneasy in the stable," said the alleged Kearney; "he ain't used to boards and covering." Heaven only knows what wild and delicious revelation lay in the statement of this fact, but the girls looked at each other, their cheeks pink with excitement as Kearney arose, and, with quiet absence of ceremony, quitted the table.

"Ain't he just lovely?" said Kate, gasping for breath, "and so witty."

"Witty!" said the gentle May, with just the slightest trace of defiance in her sweet voice; "witty, my dear? Why, don't you see that his heart is just breaking with pathos? Witty, indeed; why, when he was speaking of that poor Mexican woman that was hung, I saw the tears gather in his eyes."

"Tears," laughed the cynical Sylvester, "tears, idle tears. Why, you silly children, the man is a man of the world, a philosopher, quiet, observant, unassuming."

"Unassuming!" Was Sylvester intoxicated? But the mysterious stranger had come back and coolly resumed his broken narrative. Finding myself forgotten by the man I had hesitated to introduce to my friends, I retired early, only to hear, through the thin partitions, two hours later, enthusiastic praises of the new guest from the voluble lips of the girls, as they chatted in the next room before retiring.

At midnight I was startled by the sound of horses' hoofs and the jingling of spurs below. A conversation between my host and some mysterious personage in the darkness was carried on in such a low tone that I could not learn its import. As the cavalcade rode away I raised the window.

"What's the matter?" I called out.

"Nothing," said Sylvester, "only another one of those playful homicidal

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freaks peculiar to the country. A man was shot by Cherokee Jack over at Lagrange this morning, and that was the sheriff of Calaveras and his posse hunting him. I told him I'd seen nobody but you and your friend. By the way, I hope the cursed noise hasn't disturbed him. The poor fellow looked as if he wanted rest."

I thought so too. Nevertheless, I went softly to his room. It was empty. My impression was that he had distanced the sheriff of Calaveras by about two hours.

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PRIZE STORY

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **FREDERICK NEBEL**

TITLE: ***Try It My Way***

TYPE: A superior original in the highest tradition of **BLACK MASK**

COMMENTS: *Jack Clifford was dead on his feet, but he could see that she was so full of trouble she didn't know which way to turn. . . . It was a dingdong from the very beginning — for Headquarters man Widows as well as for Jack and the frightened girl from St. Louis . . .*

JACK WAS WAITING FOR THE NUMber 6 bus in Haggerty's Bar and Grill, up the street from the railroad station, the first time he saw her. He had worked late and was dead on his feet. It was one of those nights when going home was an ordeal; and if he couldn't sleep, he had with him the monthly report on the Riversport yards to keep him company. He was telling Haggerty about the offer of a job he had in St. Louis when she came in.

She came in fast, headlong out of the chill smoky drizzle of Terminal Plaza, a suitcase in one hand and an overnight bag in the other. And all at once she was jammed in the doorway. A dozen men stood at the bar watching her struggle, but it was Jack who moved over with a sleepy smile, saying, "Stuck, h'm?" He carried her suitcase to the nearest table and she thanked him with a harried glance and something murmured between shallow gasps of breath. She was a little thing wearing a camel's-hair coat and a small Dutch-style cap of straw with an ornament above the temple. Probably in off the 11:10 from St. Louis, Jack thought, and waiting for a bus, too. At the bar again, he peered out the window to see if Number 6 was in sight, not wanting to go home, really, for he'd been thinking about Rose all day.

The man leaning against the pole down the street could have been waiting for a bus also except that he was faced toward Haggerty's in what seemed to Jack an attitude of patient watchfulness. He made a bulky, anonymous figure in the drizzly murk. Curiosity plucked at Jack, but only tentatively: he was too sleepy. Until he glanced at the girl again.

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Her face was white, still; and she sat straight and tense as if holding her breath beyond endurance. Then suddenly her shoulders drooped and she opened her pocketbook and pulled out a handkerchief. Watching her now, Jack almost missed the sound of the bus outside. He moved toward the door, still watching her, his roused feelings nibbled at by some will-o'-the-wisp of concern.

"Miss—" He had the door open. "Miss, your bus? Number 6 bus?"

She started, looked up like someone wrenched out of a stupor. "Bus?" A frantic comprehension struggled in her eyes. And she cried out, "Yes. Yes!"

He yelled at the bus driver to hold it. He got her suitcase and overnight bag and squinted at the straight-ahead, unseeing look in her eyes; at the way she walked out, her body stiff, her step jerky. Halfway across the sidewalk she stopped short and he almost crashed into her. He saw her head twisted downstreet, her lips bitten in a grimace. The raincoated bulky figure was still there, propped patiently against the pole. Well, Jack thought, putting two and two together, so what?

"Get in," he said in an unhurried voice.

She glanced this way and that, around, everywhere, then stammered something unintelligible.

"Make up your mind," the bus driver said.

Jack said, "Keep your shirt on, junior." And to the girl, "All right, now; upseedaisy." He gave her a little shove and she got on, stumbling, seeing nothing, so that he had to nudge her into a seat. The seat creaked a little under his own weight and his body gave loosely, without tensing, at the bus driver's rough start. He said, "No. Uh-uh," when she reached for the buzzer. "I get off at Lincoln Square. The bus lines more or less radiate from there and you can get one to almost any place in the city. Or you can ride this one to the end of the line and come back."

She edged a curious glance toward him but then withdrew it and turned to the window, crouching there, her head down between her shoulders. As they neared Sully Street, Jack saw a car come speeding up behind them. But it did not pass. It stopped and started every time the bus did, all the way out Lincoln Avenue. He could tell it was the same car because one headlight was very bright, the other dim.

"Lincoln Square," he said, getting up. "Help you off?"

Her string-gloved hands were clenched on her knees. She opened them and stood up unsteadily.

On the sidewalk by the park, when the bus had driven off, Jack looked down the avenue. The familiar headlights were motionless half a block away, the car itself only a vague blur in the night. He said, "If you'll give me an idea where you want to go, I can probably tell you what bus to take."

She looked up at him, straight at

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him for the first time, the street light overhead touching her eyes with a blinding sheen. The down-turned corners of her mouth made her face seem drawn, and sharpened its good planes and angles. He could sense indecision tying her in a knot. He was too tired to consider things with objective clarity, but he didn't need a question-and-answer rigmarole to tell him she was so full of trouble she didn't know which way to turn.

"Come on," he said, turning toward the park with a thrust of his big shoulders. "Try it my way."

She kept a step behind him. Past wet-gleaming benches, through the pungent odors of damp evergreens and sodden bark. Past the children's deserted play area — a wading pool, swings, slides, a seesaw, and a small carousel that looked like sculptured meringue in the misted radiance of the park lights. He walked fast, leading her out of the park by the squat concrete building where the rest rooms were; then he nodded to the four-story apartment house across the street.

As they climbed the first flight he heard a car stop somewhere nearby with an urgent squeal. He could hear it start again, slowly, staying in low gear, the sound of the motor telling him that the driver was worrying the gas pedal, undecided what to do.

"Back here," Jack said on the top floor. He unlocked his door and when he switched on the sitting-room lights she turned away from the sudden brightness to face the wall. He was a little ashamed of the condition the place was in — magazines and newspapers strewn everywhere, littered ashtrays, a tie hanging on the floor lamp. With Rose gone nothing was the same — nothing inside him, around him, anywhere. The only woman who had been in his rooms in two years was the cleaning woman. "Sit down, have a seat," he said.

She said grimly to the wall, "I'm a fool!"

"Who isn't?"

He removed his hat and coat, went into the bathroom. He washed up, scrubbed his teeth, removed some used razor blades from the glass shelf, scrubbed the washbowl, hung up a couple of fresh towels. He took a big sponge from the bottom of the bathtub, squeezed out the residue of his morning's shower. When he returned to the sitting room she was seated at one end of the sofa in rigid expectancy.

"It's pretty comfortable," Jack said. "If you want to make it up, there's a blanket in the closet and some sheets."

"Just let me sit here. Just" — she nodded rigidly — "let me sit."

"If you get hungry, look in the refrigerator — the kitchenette's behind that curtain. I'm through with the bathroom." He paused in the bedroom doorway. "Look, it might be a good idea not to do anything screwy like running out of here during the night." He pulled at his ear, knowing he was no good at heart-to-heart talks

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but feeling a compulsion to say something encouraging. "If things seem loused up right now, maybe it'll be different tomorrow. Give it a try, anyhow. Take your time. Nobody'll be here all day tomorrow." He paused. He'd feel better if she stayed off the streets tonight. "No one can get in downstairs without a key. Or in here, either."

Her eyes fixed on him with a look of numb incredulity. Her lips trembled, and suddenly she covered her face with her hands and began to cry.

"Well," Jack said, "try to get some sleep."

He closed the door and went to bed. He fell asleep over the monthly report on the Riversport yards.

When he got up in the morning she was asleep under the afghan that Rose had knitted. He felt a light exhilaration, as if it were spring. He skipped breakfast, shave, and shower, slipped out quietly and ate in a drugstore on the Square. He got a shave downtown in the building where his office was, and he was under a hot towel when he remembered that he had left the report on his bed table. At 10:30 he phoned the apartment from his office, thinking she could send it down by messenger; but there was no answer. Nor again at 11. In a way he was disappointed; in another way, he was relieved that she had left. Wool-gathering, not paying attention, he spilled ink on his trousers.

"Police officer to see you," his secretary said.

"Shoo him in, sugar."

In his work for the railroad, running down lost or stolen shipments, it was not unusual for police officers to stop by. He called out affably, "Come in! Pull up a chair. I know some of you boys but I don't think we've met before." And a bulky, middle-aged man came in.

"Abe Widows, Mr. Clifford. Just an old work horse at Headquarters." Widows sat down with care, as if favoring a sore joint or muscle. "Touch of lumbago — ah, there, good." He looked like a moderately successful businessman, ruddy, sociable, whose taste for brown ran to suit, tie, the thin stripe in his shirt, and the heavy library frames of his glasses. He shook a little with laughter. "We lost you last night, we sure enough did. Saw you go into the park, all right, but never saw you come out. So a while ago I checked with Haggerty about the fella that helped the little lady on the bus and he steered me over here. A real run-around, huh?"

Jack grinned back at him. "You had the daylights scared out of her. And if you want to know something, I didn't feel so happy going through the park, either."

"It was a dingdong from the beginning," the Headquarters man said. "What did you finally do with her?"

Jack said, "Well, I'll tell you. I was too damned tired to think of anything else, so I put her up for the night at my place. Okay, okay," he went on, when Widows rolled his eyes

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toward the ceiling, "so I got holes in the head."

"And the funny thing is," Widows said, waving his glasses, "they don't show. For a minute there last night I thought we had our man; but you're too big, too heavy. You're aces up with Haggerty, huh? But then he's one of those wild, romantic Irishmen. Like him saying you're the kind of a fella, Mr. Clifford — the man in the crowd that helps a drunken bum out of the gutter while other people just hurry by." And in the same breath: "Where's she now?"

Jack spread his palms. "Your guess is as good as mine. She was asleep when I left this morning and I've phoned twice but there was no answer. She was in no condition to talk last night — I don't think she said more than a dozen words and they weren't exactly coherent. Why didn't you pick her up in front of Haggerty's when you had the chance?"

"The object wasn't to pick her up." Widows leaned forward in order to massage the small of his back. "We had a tail on her — a good one, too — until some rum dum in the railroad station yells, 'Hi, there, Detective Widows, how's the crime wave?' And me right behind her. Brother, her eyes hit me and she let out a yelp and away she went before I could wink her over to my partner waiting outside. Next time we saw her was near the station parking lot, but away she went again. Then Haggerty's."

"Then me," Jack said, holding up his hands. "Don't shoot, please."

"All in the day's work — forget it. St. Louis had the place where she lives staked out for two weeks — phone tapped, every move covered. They teletyped us late yesterday afternoon: meet the train, put a tail on a woman five-feet-three, slight, brown hair, camel's-hair coat, carrying a brown suitcase lettered *R.E.B.* and a black overnight bag lettered *L.B.* The *L.B.*'s for Lola Butler. She drew five grand out of the bank and they figure she's trying to get to her husband Ray. They want him out there. Murder," he said, and right after it, "You say you phoned?"

"That's right," Jack said.

"Mind if I try again?"

"Go ahead." Jack nodded to the telephone. He felt his stomach muscles contract and a dryness scratch at his throat. When Widows finally said, "Thanks," to the switchboard operator and hung up Jack said, "No dice?"

"Gone by-by, I guess." Widows got up, one hand on the small of his back and the other giving the chair's arm a push. "Well, we've got everything covered now — station, airport, bus terminal — and the State Police have road-blocks set up. St. Louis airmailed us a picture of the wife last night and we're having that printed up. No picture of him, but she'll make contact, all right. When they try to break out of the city, it'll be a collar. And if he tries to blast his way through, it's curtains for both of them."

"Keep your powder dry," Jack said, going to the door with him. "And that

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reminds me. Get one of your headlights fixed. One of them's dim. You get following someone with a pair of headlights like that and it's a dead give-away."

"Thanks, I'll have 'em checked. Speaking of powder reminds me: you fellas have a license to carry a gun, I know. Do you have one?"

"A gun? Yes. But to tell you the truth, I've never carried it. It's home somewhere — I don't remember just where."

Widows looked over his glasses. "Be a good idea to check up. You never can tell what a desperate woman will do. If by any chance she took it, let's know the serial number. See you in church."

Low radio music greeted Jack when he unlocked his apartment door at 1:30. Lola Butler turned from the window with a stifled outcry. Seeing him, she gave a nervous laugh.

"H'm?" Jack said.

"Oh, I guess I didn't expect you back so soon. I've always startled easily."

"I forgot some papers this morning." He gestured here and there with his chin. "You've been a busy little bee."

"I had to keep occupied."

Ashtrays gleamed, magazines were neatly stacked, the sofa pillows were plumped up. His bed was made and there were trees in his shoes and the litter ordinarily spread on his bureau was confined to a tray. The bathroom was spic-and-span. A pair of nylon stockings hung from the shower-curtain rod and their suggestion of feminine intimacy, in his own place, made him think with a twinge of Rose.

"The stockings," Lola Butler said. "I forgot. And I used your tub, too. I had to have a bath. I felt" — her lips pressed together — "dirty."

He moved past her with a dubious glance which had nothing to do with what she had said: it had to do with something he had observed in the street below.

"Have you been out yet?" he said, standing by the window.

"No. I was getting ready to leave."

He could see a car parked in the service alley below. The hood was up and the man sitting on the bumper looked like any man waiting for a mechanic to show up. Jack turned from the window and Lola Butler stopped halfway between the bureau and the bed table, where the report lay beside the telephone.

"I phoned several times," he said, "but there was no answer."

She looked in the mirror above the bureau as she put on her hat. "I didn't want to answer it." She colored. "I thought maybe you wouldn't want someone to know there was a woman here. It rang and rang. The last time I did pick it up, but I didn't answer — I put it down again."

He watched her adjusting the hat. Since the night before she had gathered together her interior resources and now seemed reasonably composed. She wasn't stupid — she knew

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the risk involved. He had no cosmic views on law and order, or duty to society: he had no right to interfere. The thing for him to do was to get out, fast.

He tapped the ink stain on his trousers. "I'd like to change my trousers."

She went into the sitting room and he closed the door behind her. He changed his suit and crossed to the bed table to pick up the report. There was a letter under the glass ashtray.

Dear Friend,

It's a simple, plain word, friend is, but it's a word that has always meant a great deal to me. And the miracle is, a stranger can sometimes be a friend. You can't imagine how wonderful it was to have a friend to lean on, if only for a little while.

I shall always remember you in my thoughts, in many small ways. It takes years sometimes to feel that way, and sometimes, maybe once in a lifetime, it takes less than an hour.

I saw your name on some old envelopes when I cleaned up, but you don't know mine. There is no reason why you should. But thank you, thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

Jack put the letter back exactly where he had found it, knowing that she had intended him to discover it after she left. He was out of character when he entered the sitting room: too brisk, too much on the ball, in refutation of the hangdog feeling inside him. " 'Bye. Hope you make out all right." He opened the door. "Got to get back to work."

"Will you shake hands with me?" she said, coming over. "Shake hands goodbye?" Her smile flickered between gayety and wistfulness. "I'm not much good at saying things I feel, but you must realize how much I appreciate—"

Jack said, "Sit down." He strolled back past her and hung his hat on the floor lamp. "The place is staked out."

"The place is what?"

"Staked out. Police. Detectives." He braced his arms on the window-sill. "One down there in the alley, you can bet. Two in the park across the street—I recognized them. You haven't got a chance, Mrs. Butler."

She made no outcry, no sound at all. But presently she stood beside him, quite still, the stillness knitting around him like a web that irked and baffled. "Well?" he growled. And she said, "Was it in the newspapers?"

"No. And it won't be." He went prowling around the room, finger-combing his hair, telling her about his talk with Widows.

She looked pensive. "I saw him by the pole last night. I thought by taking the bus I could lose him. But then—I didn't want him to think you were involved with me. I wanted to get off again . . ." She glanced anxiously at him. "Are you in trouble now?"

He dismissed that with a shake of his head. "But you are. And so is your husband."

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She made a fist and pumped it up and down. "But it's something I had to do. I had to!"

He sighed and went into the kitchenette and made himself a drink. He came out saying, "Sure, sure," with a dark smoldering in his eyes. "I had a wife, and if I'd got myself in the same kind of jam she'd have done the same thing. But I wouldn't have wanted her to!" he shouted. "I didn't want her to have the kid. Oh, yes — I wanted kids. Two, three, half a dozen. But not after she was warned against it. A hundred-to-one shot she'd never come through — and she took the chance because I used to go around shooting my mouth off about the number of kids we were going to have —" He stopped, his face dull red. His eyes were roiled with a bitter, caged anger as he glared at Lola Butler. "Because it was something she had to do. Had to!"

She looked down. "For love," she said, smiling wistfully at her hands. "For love of her husband."

He turned his back on her, saying, "And she had one chance in a hundred. You haven't got one, or a small piece of one. He needs clothes and the five thousand, but none of it'll do him any good. Believe me, you're throwing your money away. To say nothing of your life."

"It was always his, really — I mean the money. But his father when he died two years ago left it to me. It was a little over seven thousand in all and his father made me promise not to let Ray handle it. He knew how it would slip through Ray's fingers. It was for use in case of illness, or insurance premiums, or the down payment on a house. But I wouldn't give him any for that gambling debt." Doubt bothered her, clouding her eyes. "I should have. Then he wouldn't have killed that girl —" Her eyes brimmed for a moment. "Spilled milk — no!" and her eyes cleared. "I'll get my things. May I use your phone for a taxi?"

Jack said, "The minute you walk out of here the cops will follow you, and this time they won't lose you."

"You probably know a taxi stand nearby. Would you phone, please?"

"No," he said bluntly. "What happens? The cops follow you and the minute you make contact with your husband the ball game is over."

She sat down on the sofa, leaned back and closed her eyes. "I'm lost," she said. "I don't know what to do."

"I don't, either. So for the time being, stay put."

Because he thought he had detected in her tone the ragged edge of desperation, hysteria, he tried to remember where his gun was. He remembered — in a cigar box on a shelf in the kitchenette. A small revolver still containing the first and only bullets he had ever put into it. He slipped it into his hip pocket.

"I ought to be back from the office at 5:30," he said.

It was 5:10 when he got off the bus at the Square and bought some meat and groceries in a supermarket. You

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rarely saw motorcycle patrolmen in this area, but now Jack saw two. Walking through the park, he caught sight of a detective he knew slightly, and detoured away. There were others, he was sure, with whom he wasn't acquainted. And Widows was somewhere in the neighborhood — that was a dead certainty.

"Well?" Lola searched his face when he came in.

"They're still there. Oh, they'll be there for some time. I picked up some food, but I'm no cook. Want to try?"

In the bedroom, he noticed that the letter was missing. He stood by the window thinking of it and trying to remember the exact words.

The car was gone from the service alley below, but the door of a small storage building was open a few inches and faint puffs of smoke drifted out. The busy sounds of a woman getting a meal ready touched him with an old nostalgia.

They ate on a card table and Jack helped with the dishes, whistling snatches from a popular song. "When you got in last night, where were you supposed to meet him?"

"In the free parking lot next to the station. The clothes and money are in the suitcase. I was to look for a certain car. If there were policemen around I was to spend the night at a hotel and try the parking lot again at 10 tonight; and if necessary, at 10 tomorrow night. We live over a drugstore and he phoned me long distance there instead of to our phone because he thought ours might be tapped. He's broke. What money he got for the rings and necklace he used to buy the car second-hand."

"Your rings and necklace?" Jack said.

She bent over the sink, gripped the edge of it. "Don't — please!" The cords in her neck stood out. She shook her head from side to side, again and again, biting her lip. "Just — don't!"

Jack went out for a walk. It was pleasant in the park, the globes of light hanging like mellow moons among the trees. He caught a glimpse of a detective he had met once — Ruber or Rober, his name was — but did not let on. It seemed strange to him that the police should have put on a stake-out based on nothing more than a hunch. But thinking along these lines, he was not taken by surprise when he ran into Widows eating in a tavern on the square.

"Hello, hello," Widows said sociably. "This chili-mac is good."

Jack said, "Any luck?"

"So-so. We got a lot more teletype stuff on Butler, and it's very interesting. Comes of a decent family but the way it looks he was always fouling off balls. One job after another, and none more than a month or two. Selling cars, liquor, sporting goods, real estate — you name it. Something about a prizefight fix, too. And something about crooked bridge games in a hotel room. None of it was tight enough to knock him down, but you get an idea the way the wind was blowing. Socked his wife once, too, at the country club."

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"Sounds like a heel," Jack said.

"A real self-made one, sure enough." Widows held his glasses up to the light, put them back on again. "Then this gambling debt he got into. They were crowding him, I guess. He'd given this chick he was two-timing with some jewelry and when he tried to get it back in order to pay the gambling debt she wouldn't give. He threatened her and she told a couple of girl friends about it. He killed her the next night and took the jewelry. Winged the bellboy who was at the door and heard the shots."

Jack popped a salted peanut into his mouth. "Robbery and murder. Some bowl of soup."

"It's no bowl of cherries, for sure. His wife should have done what she started to do six months ago after he gave her that shiner. Divorce. But she called it off."

"See you around," Jack said.

Widows looked over his library-frame glasses. "Probably."

When Jack got back to the apartment Lola was playing solitaire. "Play gin?" he said; and they played till 10, mostly in silence, their glances crossing and touching in small glimmers of interest or sudden, vague embarrassments. Finally Jack brought sheets and a blanket from the closet. "You might as well make up the sofa and be comfortable. No work tomorrow, so I'll see you for breakfast."

She began to make up the sofa. "What would you like for breakfast?"

"Oh, I dunno. There's some pancake mix in there. A couple of eggs, maybe — scrambled. Bacon. And coffee — plenty of coffee."

As he went to his bedroom he saw her laying out a nightgown. And when he came out in the morning she wore a blue silk robe over the nightgown and he smelled a faint perfume. He ate in his robe, too, feeling that he was in a dream, a bright and sunny dream that would black out any minute. She told him not to bother with the dishes and while she did them he got dressed. He kept turning her name over in his thoughts, seeking some diminutive. Lo. Yes, Lo seemed to fit her.

"I'm going to leave today," she said.

Jack looked at the wall and said in glum resignation, "For love of her husband!"

"If it were," she said, "it might be beautiful. But it isn't for love. I don't know what it is, exactly. A combination of things — pride, obstinacy, resentment. Resentment against all the times I was told I got the money because I'd made up to his father. And perhaps remorse for not paying his gambling debt. And the memory of when there was love. Yes, for that, too. And for that, if he dies, I'll never want to see the face of the man who kills him."

Jack said, "You might not get the chance. If he tries to shoot his way through a road block, you may die with him."

She was silent for a minute, her face still but resolute. "I never intended to go with him. It's not me he

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needs. He needs the clothes and money — the clothes because the police know he never came home after the shooting and he's afraid the clothing stores might have been warned. But I'll have to forget about the clothes. I'm going from here to a hotel, leave the baggage there, and take just the money. I've already wrapped it in some brown paper from the groceries. That way I can move faster."

Tension that had been coiled inside Jack like a spring unwound slowly and he opened his hands wide, spreading his fingers, then flexing them. She might be able to get away with it — unless something went wrong at the contact point. But she might, she just might. And he might see her again. In St. Louis, even.

"I'll get my car out and drive you to the hotel."

Her eyes filled as she gazed at him and he shook his head, made a fist, and tapped her gently on the jaw. She took hold of his fist in both hands and pressed it against her cheek, then ran into the bedroom.

"I'll see you in St. Louis, too," he said. "I can get a job there."

The only place he could park was across the street. When he returned with Lola and the bags he saw a young man in a sports shirt toss aside a comic book and stroll down the street. An older man sitting on a bench appeared to stir from a doze; he stretched, rose, and wandered up the street, yawning as he stooped into a car. The man in the sports shirt had opened the door of a car and now stood with his foot on the step lighting a cigarette. The park was alive with the happy shouts and squeals of children at play.

Jack put the bags on the floor in back and said, "One detective down the street, another up. They'll move when we move, but pay no attention. I saw somebody crane his neck in that rest room window — staying behind in case we change our minds. Get in."

He was stepping on the starter when a laundry truck double-parked, and he was about to yell to the driver to move when the door behind him opened and a man stumbled into the car.

"One wrong move and I'll blow your head off."

Jack wrenched about, saw Lola's face turned toward him. Her eyes strained wide and stricken across her shoulder. He knew the scream was coming and in the same instant knew he was powerless to stop it. The man in back saw it coming, too. He made a short, savage chop with his gun and there was no scream, only a faint cry, "Ray!" The ornament on her hat shattered and she collapsed sideways against Jack. He made a raucous, outraged, wordless sound.

"Shut up," Butler panted. "She always yelped at her own shadow. Get moving, quick. Around the park. The Ace Parking lot. Drive in — the car's all the way in the back. Get going!"

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"You blind?" Jack choked. "Can't you see the truck?"

Butler bleated, "The dummy! The stupid double-parking — The key! Throw her pocketbook back here."

Jack flung it back, snarling, "If anybody's a stupid dummy — why the hell did you have to hit her like that?"

"You want it, too? Shut up, shut up!" Butler's voice was shrill. Jack could hear the rasp and slap of the suitcase straps, and Butler's voice again jerking out hysterically: "I've had a long wait — long, long. Knew it was somewhere in this block. So a long wait. Day and night. In that rest room — in and out of the toilet stalls whenever anybody came in. Nothing to eat. No sleep. And her up there with some jerk that picked her up —"

"Butler —"

"Shut up! Now, buster, sit still. Don't make a move for five minutes. One move, one peep out of you —"

Butler was on the sidewalk and Jack saw in the side mirror a hand clutching a brown-paper package; then he heard the quick footfalls move off into the park. He noticed the blood on his shirt cuff and as he glared at it another drop fell from Lola's head. Rage howled in his brain and the next moment he was out of the car.

"Butler!"

Children were splashing in the wading pool as Butler ran past it, looking back in panic. Jack raised his gun but two little girls riding a seesaw were in the way. Then Butler was dodging among half a dozen swings all in motion; one knocked the package from his hand, sent it tumbling away as police whistles began to blow. He ran on, his arm stuck out behind him like a boom, wavering: his shot was wild, traced by a dribbling of leaf fragments. Following, Jack scooped up the brown-paper package. He stopped to aim, but there was another little girl skimming down a long wooden slide. People were scattering, their outcries spurting above the music of the carousel. The arthritic old balloon man hobbled desperately inch by inch, his eyes beseeching the people who ran by.

Jack yelled, "Butler, look out! Don't! You'll kill somebody!" For Butler had stopped, had swung about at the carousel. Jack flung himself on the arthritic old man, crashing to the ground with him. Butler shot and half a dozen balloons burst like machine-gun fire about Jack's ears. Watching Butler disappear beyond the carousel, he choked, "It's okay, Pop," and lay there in a cold sweat. Then all of a sudden he wanted to sob with immense gratefulness because he had not shot and killed Ray Butler.

"You all right?" Widows said, bending over as far as he could. "Take a nine count, fella. And don't worry about Butler. The boys are taking care of him. With no pictures to go by, it's a good thing you bellowed his name." Between them, they helped the old balloon man up.

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"And that was a good tip about the headlights. Ours checked okay, so I figured it must have been Butler's that tailed you."

"Thanks for not warning me," Jack said. "Okay, I had it coming."

Widows waved his glasses. "Consider my position. I knew you were keeping her under wraps up there. When I left your office I tried again from a dial phone in the park booth and kept ringing and ringing. It must've got on her nerves. Anyhow, she lifted the hook; so I knew somebody was there by the way the ringing broke off and — Hey, you going away mad?"

"I've got to get back to her."

Jack recovered the brown-paper package from among the balloons and strode away. Behind him he heard a shot, then another. Then a barrage of shots. And Widows calling out, "That's it. That's the jackpot."

Lola was sitting up straight, watching for him, shivering, when Jack tossed the revolver and the package on the seat and got in behind the wheel. Seeing the gun, she closed her eyes tight and turned her head away. When he said, "Look," she would not look at him. "Not me," he said, dropping the bullets into her lap. "Thank God, it wasn't me."

She groped for his hand, held on. Her own hand shook at first and then steadied, with a pressure that seemed to come down her arm from somewhere deep within her. She turned toward him. The look in her eyes reminded him of the immense gratefulness he had felt a little while before.

"You and me both," he said. "You and me both, Lo."

"Q"

NEXT MONTH . . .

A memorable story of the outdoors —

DION HENDERSON's *From the Mouse to the Hawk*

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Herewith Detective-Sergeant Porteous's report to his Chief Constable on a crime of passion which occurred in Vicarage Lane, Didford Parva, England. At the end of the report the good sergeant says he is unable to determine the murderer. But the Chief Constable, you will find, is more astute. He found the clue to the murderer's identity in Detective-Sergeant Porteous's own report.

So you are hereby forewarned: watch for the all-revealing clue.

If you should happen to miss it on first reading, perhaps you would care to emulate the Chief Constable — by reading the Detective-Sergeant's short statement twice. And in case you accept this challenge — from both the author and the Editors — we are taking the precaution of printing the Chief Constable's solution (a single terse paragraph) at the bottom of page 105 . . . Happy hunting!

DOUBLE JEOPARDY

by CYRIL HARE

DETECTIVE-SERGEANT PORTEOUS'S report read as follows: *To the Chief Constable* — Sir: On the night of the 10th inst., at 7:31 P.M., a telephone message was received at this station to the effect that a girl had been stabbed in Vicarage Lane, Didford Parva. The caller gave his name as John Dennison, already known to me as a youth living in Council Cottages, Yewbury, and the subject of proceedings in the Juvenile Court at Markhampton for assault and larceny (see File 892 of 1955).

I proceeded to the scene, arriving at 7:38 P.M., where I found the body of Phyllis Barking, aged 18, of Jubilee Terrace, Didford Parva. The medical report (herewith) shows that she had been killed by a stab wound consistent with the use of a long-bladed knife.

I was immediately joined by John Dennison, who approached from the direction of the telephone kiosk, distant approximately 150 yards. He was in a highly emotional state.

He informed me that he had met the deceased by appointment that evening with the intention of accompanying her to an "old-tyme" dance at the Town Hall, Markhampton. They were walking to the bus stop at the end of Vicarage Lane to take the 7:40 P.M. bus when a man, whom he could not distinguish in the darkness, sprang out from behind the bushes bordering the lane, struck the deceased from behind, and immediately ran away.

Questioned further, Dennison volunteered the information that he believed the assailant to be Charles

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Packer, already known to me as a youth living at Riverside Lane, Didford Magna, and the subject of proceedings at the last Assizes for malicious wounding (see File 493 of 1955). He stated that Packer had twice threatened him with bodily violence on account of his association with the deceased, who, I have reason to think, was a girl of bad character.

After making the necessary arrangements for the removal of the body, I invited Dennison to accompany me to the police station. Here I found Charles Packer, who was just completing a statement taken down by Detective-Constable Kimber.

On seeing one another, the two men assumed a fighting attitude, and it became necessary for their own protection to lock them in separate cells.

From D.-C. Kimber's report (herewith) it will be seen that Packer arrived at the police station at 7:40 P.M. (From the experiment, I have established that it is possible to run from the scene of the crime to the police station in 10 minutes, 12 seconds.)

Packer's statement is to the following effect: He had met the deceased by appointment that evening with the intention of accompanying her to the Cairo Cinema in Markhampton. They were walking to the bus stop at the end of Vicarage Lane . . . but I need not continue, sir. As will be seen from a comparison of the two statements, they are to all intents identical.

Packer expressed to D. C. Kimber his firm belief that Dennison — who, he stated, had actually assaulted him on three occasions — was responsible for the murder.

In these circumstances, I had both men carefully searched.

On Dennison I found a handkerchief (soiled), a copy of the Markhampton *Evening Record*, a packet of cigarettes, a box of matches, a wallet containing four pound notes, 3s. 6½d. in coins, a pocket comb, and a sheath knife. He informed me that he carried the knife for protection, with particular reference to Packer. It bore the appearance of having been recently cleaned.

His suit was of the "Teddy boy" variety, and on the cuff of the right sleeve I discovered a smear of blood. He readily admitted that this in all probability came from the deceased, whom, he said, he had supported as she fell after the assault.

On Packer I found a handkerchief (soiled), a lighter, three indecent photographs (herewith), a wallet containing two pound notes, 10s. 6d. in coins, a pocket comb, and a belt with an empty sheath. Examination of his cell revealed a knife similar to that found on Dennison — it was hidden in a ventilator. After some difficulty I induced him to agree that it was his property. He stated that he carried it for protection, with particular reference to Dennison.

It also showed signs of having been cleaned recently, but further inspection revealed traces of blood. Bloodstains were also discovered on his

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handkerchief. Packer explained these by saying that he was subject to nose bleeding. So far as the blood on the knife was concerned, he said that he had cut his hand while cleaning it. There was, in fact, a recently healed cut on his right thumb. No blood was found on his clothing, which is also of the "Teddy boy" style.

Analysis in the police laboratory (report herewith) established that all the blood found was of Group O, which is the same blood group to which the deceased belonged. Packer's blood is also of the same group, but Dennison's, on examination, proved to be Group AB.

On the morning of the 11th inst. I returned to Vicarage Lane and examined the ground. The lane being muddy, it was possible to distinguish the footprints of a man and a woman heading toward the scene of the crime. I also found the footprints of a man leading from the opposite end of the lane to a group of bushes next to the scene of the murder. (Photos herewith.) At this spot the footprints became confused with those of the first pair and with those of myself and other police officers.

I secured the shoes worn by the deceased and was satisfied that these fitted the female footprints referred to. I then obtained the shoes worn by each of the two men, and was immediately struck by the fact that they were in every respect similar, being new, yellow-brown leather brogues with crepe rubber soles, both size 10.

Inquiries revealed that they had been bought within a few days of each other at the same firm of outfitters in High Street, Markhampton. Both pairs were somewhat muddy, and needless to say, each fitted perfectly both sets of male footprints.

Pursuing my investigations, I interviewed the mother and sister of the deceased. The former was unable to throw any light on her daughter's movements, but the latter told me that the deceased had been in the habit of going out with both young men indiscriminately and that she had been threatened by each of them on account of her partiality for the other. She was unable to say with which of them her sister intended to pass the evening in question, but she stated that her sister Phyllis was deeply addicted to dancing, and regularly attended dances at the Town Hall.

She added that Phyllis was a fan of Dwight Biddle, whose new film, *Passion in Paris*, opened at the Cairo Cinema on that day (see advert. from the *Evening Record*, herewith).

The inquiry now appears to be at a standstill. Both young men continue to assert the truth of their respective stories, and I am totally unable to determine which of them is lying. The possibility of further evidence coming to light seems to be remote, and, while it is quite certain that one of the two is guilty of willful murder, I must regretfully conclude that there is no prospect of making an arrest in this case.

J. D. Porteous,
Detective-Sergt.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: GEORGES SIMENON

TITLE: *Journey into Time*

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Inspector Maigret

LOCALE: Near Vitry-aux-Loges, France

COMMENTS: *Mood, atmosphere, and Simenon's deep understanding of a French village — of its people and its way of life. Maigret's investigation of the Potru case was like stepping into a past century.*

IT WAS ONE OF THOSE RARE CASES which can be solved by studying diagrams and documents and by applying police methods. In fact, when Inspector Maigret left the Quai des Orfèvres he had all the facts clearly in mind — even the position of the wine barrels.

He had expected a short jaunt into the countryside. Instead, he found himself making a long journey backward into time. The train which took him to Vitry-aux-Loges, scarcely a hundred kilometers from Paris, was a conveyance straight from the picture-books of Épinal which he had not seen since his childhood. And when he inquired about a taxi, the people at the station thought he was joking. He would have to make the rest of the trip in the baker's cart, they said. However he pursuaded the butcher to drive over in his delivery truck.

"How often do you go down there?" the inspector asked, naming the little village to which his investigation was taking him.

"Twice a week, regularly. Thanks to you, they'll have an extra meat delivery this week."

Maigret had been born only 40 kilometers away, on the banks of the Loire, yet he was surprised by the somber, tragic aspect of this sector of the Forest of Orléans. The road ran through deep woods for ten kilometers without a sign of civilization. When the truck reached a tiny village in a clearing, Maigret asked, "Is this it?"

"The next hamlet."

It wasn't raining, but the woods

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were damp. The trees had lost most of their foliage and the pale, raw light of the sky bore down heavily through the bare branches. The dead leaves were rotting on the ground. An occasional shot cracked in the distance.

"Is there much hunting around here?"

"That's probably Monsieur the Duke."

In another smaller clearing some 30 one-story houses were clustered about the steeple of a church. None of the houses could be less than a century old, and their black-tile roofs gave them an inhospitable air.

"You can let me off at the house of the Potru sisters."

"I guessed that was where you'd be going. It's right across from the church."

Maigret got out. The butcher drove on a little farther and opened the back of his delivery truck. A few housewives came to look, but could not make up their minds to buy. It was not their regular day for meat.

Maigret had pored so long over the diagrams sent to Paris by the original investigators that he could have entered the house with his eyes shut. As it was, the rooms were so dark that he wasn't much better off with his eyes open. As he walked into the shop at the front of the house, he seemed to be stepping into a past century.

The room was as dimly lit as a canvas by an Old Master. The dark brown tonality of an ancient masterpiece was diffused over the walls and furniture — a monochrome in chiaroscuro broken only by a highlight here and there, on a glass jar or a copper kettle.

The older of the Demoiselles Potru had lived in this house since her birth 65 years before — her younger sister was 62. Their parents had spent their lives there before them. Nothing in the shop had changed in all that time — not the counter with its old-fashioned scales and its gleaming candy jars, nor shelves of notions, nor the grocery section with its stale odors of cinnamon and chicory, nor the zinc-covered slab which served as the village bar. A barrel of kerosene stood in a corner next to a smaller barrel of cooking oil. In the rear were two long tables, polished by time, flanked by backless benches.

A door opened at the left, and a woman in her early thirties came in, carrying a baby in her arms. She looked at Maigret.

"What is it you want?"

"Never mind about me. I'm here for the investigation. I suppose you are a neighbor?"

The woman, whose apron ballooned over a rounded belly, said, "I'm Marie Lacore. My husband is the blacksmith."

"I see." Maigret had just noticed the kerosene lamp hanging from the ceiling. So the hamlet had no electricity . . .

The second room, which Maigret entered without invitation, would have been completely dark were it not for the two logs blazing on the hearth. The flickering light revealed

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an immense bed on which were piled several mattresses and a puffy, red eiderdown quilt. An old woman lay motionless on the bed. Her haggard, rigid face was lifeless except for the sharp, questioning eyes.

"She still can't speak?" Maigret asked Marie Lacore.

The blacksmith's wife shook her head in the negative. Maigret shrugged, sat down on a straw-bottomed chair, and began taking papers from his pockets.

There was nothing sensational about the actual crime, which had taken place five days earlier. The Potru sisters, who lived alone in the hovel, were believed to have accumulated a considerable nest-egg. They owned three other houses in the village and had a long-established reputation as misers.

During the night of Saturday to Sunday, their neighbors remembered hearing unusual noises but had thought nothing of it at the time. However, a farmer passing the house at dawn on Sunday noticed that the bedroom window was wide open, looked in, and shouted for help.

Amélie Potru, the older sister, was lying on the floor in a pool of blood near the window, clad only in a red-stained nightgown. The younger sister, Marguerite, was lying on the bed, her face turned to the wall, dead, with three knife wounds in her chest, her cheek gashed, and one eye torn half from its socket.

Amélie was still alive. She had staggered to the window to give the alarm but, weakened from loss of blood, had fallen unconscious before she could cry out. She had no less than eleven stab wounds in her right side and shoulder, none of them serious.

The second drawer of the dresser had been pulled out and apparently ransacked. Among the linen scattered on the floor was a briefcase of mildewed leather in which the sisters must have kept their business papers. It was empty, but lying nearby were a savings-bank passbook, deeds to property, leases, and bills for supplies.

The Orléans authorities who made the original investigation sent Maigret detailed diagrams and photographs of the scene as well as a transcript of the questioning of witnesses.

Marguerite, the dead woman, had been buried two days after the murder. Amélie had resisted all efforts to take her to a hospital, sinking her nails into the bed sheets, fighting off neighbors who tried to move her, and demanding — with her eyes — that she be left at home. She had lost all power of speech.

The medical examiner from Orléans declared that no vital organ had been injured and that her loss of voice must be due to shock. In any case, no sound had passed her lips for five days; yet despite her bandages and her immobility, she followed all proceedings with her eyes. Even now her gaze never left Maigret for a moment.

Three hours after the Orléans authorities finished their investigation, they arrested a man who from the evidence must be the murderer:

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Marcel, illegitimate son of the dead Potru sister. The late Marguerite had given birth to Marcel when she was twenty-three, so he must be thirty-nine years old. For a while Marcel had worked with the hounds of the Dyke's hunt. More recently he had been a woodcutter in the forest and lived in an abandoned tumbledown farmhouse near the Loup-Pendu pond, ten kilometers from the village.

The villagers looked upon Marcel as a brute, a miserable wretch who was little better than an animal. Several times he had disappeared, leaving his wife and five children for weeks on end. He beat his family more often than he fed them. What's more, he was a drunkard.

Maigret decided to reread at the scene of the crime the transcript of Marcel's testimony: "I came on my bicycle around 7 o'clock just when the old women were sitting down to eat. I had a drink at the bar, then I went out to the courtyard and killed a rabbit. I skinned it and cleaned it and my mother cooked it. My aunt yelled her head off because I ate their rabbit, but she always yells. She can't stand me . . ."

According to the testimony of other villagers, Marcel frequently came to the Potru sisters for a private spree. His mother never refused him anything, and his aunt, who was afraid of him, did nothing more than complain.

Maigret had stopped off in Orléans to see Marcel in his cell, and got further details.

"There was more argument," Marcel said, "when I took a cheese out of the shop and cut myself a hunk. Seems I shouldn't have cut into a whole cheese . . ."

"What wine were you drinking?" Maigret asked.

"Some of the wine from the shop."

"How was the room lighted?"

"The oil lamp. Well, after dinner my mother wasn't feeling well, so she went to bed. She asked me to get her some papers out of the second drawer in the dresser. She gave me the key. I took the papers over to the bed and we went over the bills. It was the end of the month."

"You took the papers out of the briefcase? What else was in there?"

"Bonds. A big bundle of bonds. A hundred francs worth. Maybe more."

"Did you go into the storeroom?"

"No."

"You didn't light a candle to go into the storeroom?"

"Never. . . . At half-past 9 I put the papers back in the drawer and then I left. I drank another slug of rot-gut as I went out through the shop. . . . And anybody says I killed the old ladies is a liar. Why don't you talk to the Yugo?"

To the great astonishment of Marcel's lawyer, Maigret broke off his questioning.

Yarko, whom everyone called "The Yugo" because he was from Yugoslavia, was a bit of jetsam who had been washed into the village by the war and who had stayed on. He lived alone in the wing of a house near the

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Potru sisters and worked as a carter, hauling logs from the woods. He, too, was a confirmed drunkard, although for some time the Potru sisters had refused to serve him; he had run up too long a tab. One night they had asked Marcel to throw him out, and he had given the Yugo a bloody nose in the process.

The Potru sisters had another grievance against the Yugo. He kept his horses in a stable he had rented from them, a dilapidated out-building back of their courtyard, but he was always months behind in his rent. At this moment, he was probably in the woods with his team.

Maigret continued to match his thoughts with the actual scene of the crime. Papers in hand, he walked to the fireplace where the Orléans men had found a kitchen knife among the ashes on the morning after the murder. The wooden handle had been completely burned, obviously to destroy fingerprints.

On the other hand, there had been plenty of fingerprints on the dresser drawer and on the briefcase — and all of them had been Marcel's.

On a candlestick which stood on a table in the bedroom they had found Amélie Potru's fingerprints — and only hers. Amélie's cold eyes still followed Maigret's every move.

"I suppose your mind is still made up not to speak?" he growled as he lit his pipe.

Silence.

Maigret stooped to make a chalk mark on the floor around some blood-stains that had been indicated on the diagram.

Marie Lacore asked him, "Will you be here for a few minutes? I'd like to put my dinner on the stove."

So Maigret found himself alone with the old woman in the house he already knew by heart, although he had never seen it before. He had spent a whole day and night studying the dossier with its diagrams and sketches, and Orléans had done such a thorough job of groundwork that he was not in the least surprised, except perhaps to find the sordid reality even more shocking than he had imagined.

And yet he himself was the son of peasants. He knew that such things existed — that there were still hamlets in France where people went on living as they had lived since the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries. But to be suddenly plunged into this village in the forest, into this ancient house, into the room alone with the old woman whose alert mind seemed to be stalking Maigret — all this was like entering one of those wretched hospitals where the worst of human monstrosities are hidden away from the eyes of normal men.

When he had begun to work on the case in Paris, Maigret had jotted down a few notes on the original report:

1. Why would Marcel have burned the knife handle without worrying about his fingerprints on the dresser and the briefcase?

2. If he had used the candle, why had he carried it back into the bedroom and put it out?

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3. Why didn't the bloodstains on the floor follow a straight line from the bed to the window?

4. Since Marcel might well have been recognized in the street at 9:30 in the evening, why had he left the house by the front door, instead of going through the courtyard which led directly into open country?

But there was one bit of evidence that worried even Marcel's lawyer. One of Marcel's buttons had been found in the old women's bed, a distinctive button which definitely had come from Marcel's old corduroy hunting jacket.

"When I was cleaning the rabbit, I caught my jacket on something," had been Marcel's explanation, "and one of the buttons must have pulled loose."

Maigret finished rereading his notes. He stood up and looked at Amélie with a peculiar smile on his lips. She was going to be sorely vexed at not being able to follow him with her eyes, for he opened a door and disappeared into the storeroom.

The cubicle was dimly lit by a dirty skylight. Maigret's gaze traveled from the stacks of cordwood to the four wine barrels against the wall — the barrels he had come all the way from Paris to see. The first two barrels were full. One contained red wine, the other white. He thumped the next two barrels. They were empty. On one of the empty barrels several tears of tallow had fallen and congealed. Technicians from *Identité Judiciaire* reported that the tallow on the barrel was identical with the tallow of the candle in the bedroom.

The report of the inspector-in-charge from Orléans had this to say about the evidence:

"The candle drippings on the barrel were probably left by Marcel when he came to drink wine. His wife admits that he was quite drunk when he got home that night, and the zigzag tire tracks of his bicycle confirm this fact."

Maigret looked about him for something which he had expected to find but which apparently was not there. Puzzled, he stepped back into the bedroom, opened the window, and called to two urchins who were gaping at the house.

"Listen, boys. Will one of you run and get me a saw?"

"A wood saw?"

"Right."

Maigret could still feel the old woman's eyes boring into his back — live eyes in a dead face, eyes that moved only when his bulky figure moved.

The boys came back bringing two saws of different sizes. At the same time Marie Lacore returned from next door.

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting," she said. "I left the baby home. Now I'll have to attend to —"

"Wait just a few minutes, will you?" That was a scene that Maigret intended to skip, thank you! He'd had enough without it. He went back into the storeroom and started sawing one of the empty barrels —

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the one with the candle drippings on it.

He knew what he would find. He was sure of his theory. If he had had any lingering doubts about it when he arrived, they had been dispelled by the atmosphere of the old house. Amélie Potru had turned out to be exactly the sort of person he had anticipated. And the very walls of the house seemed to ooze the avarice and hate he had expected.

Another thing. When he first entered the shop, Maigret had noted a pile of newspapers on the counter. That was one important fact the Orléans reports had omitted — that the Potru sisters were also the newsdealers of the village. Further, Amélie owned spectacles which, since she did not wear them about the house, were obviously reading glasses. So Amélie was able to read — and thus the biggest question mark in Inspector Maigret's theory was eliminated. His theory based on hate — a festering hate made even more purulent by long years of being shut up together within the same four walls, of sharing the same narrow interests by day, and even the same bed by night.

But there was one experience the two sisters had not shared. Marguerite, the younger, had had a child. She had known love and motherhood. Amélie had shared only the annoying aftermath. The brat had clung to her skirts, too, for ten or fifteen years. And after he had struck out for himself, he was always coming back to eat and drink and to demand money.

It was Amélie's money as much as it was Marguerite's. More, really, since Amélie was the older and therefore had been working and earning longer.

So Amélie hated Marcel with a hate nourished by a thousand incidents of their daily life — the rabbit he had killed, the cheese he had brazenly cut into, thus spoiling its sale value. And his mother had not said a word in protest — she never did.

Yes, Amélie read the newspapers. She must have read about the scandals, the crimes, the murder trials which take up so much space in certain papers. If so, she would know the importance of fingerprints. Then too, Amélie was afraid of her nephew. She must have been furious with her sister for showing him the hiding place of their treasure, for letting him touch the bonds he most certainly coveted.

"One of these days he'll come to murder us both."

Surely those words had been uttered in the house dozens of times, Maigret reflected as he sawed away at the wine barrel. He realized he was perspiring and stopped sawing long enough to take off his hat and coat. He placed them on the next barrel.

The rabbit . . . the cheese . . . then suddenly the remembrance that Marcel had left his prints on the dresser drawer and the briefcase. And if that was not enough, there was the readily identifiable button which his mother, having already gone to bed, had not yet sewed back on his jacket.

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If Marcel had killed for gain, why had he emptied the briefcase on the floor instead of taking it with him, bonds and all? As for Yarko the Yugoslav, Maigret had learned that he could not read.

Maigret's reasoning had begun with Amélie's wounds — eleven of them. There were too many by far and all of them were too superficial not to be extremely suspicious. Besides, they were all on the right side. She must have been clumsy, as well as afraid of pain. She wanted neither to die nor to suffer. She had expected help from the neighbors after she had opened the window to scream . . .

Would a murderer have given her time to run to the window?

And fate had laughed at her too. She had lost consciousness before her cries had awakened anyone, so she had spent the night on the floor, with nobody to staunch her bleeding.

Yes, that must have been the way it happened. It could not have been otherwise. She had killed her drowsing sister; then, her fingers wrapped in cloth of some kind to prevent leaving prints, she had opened the drawer and rifled the briefcase. The bonds must disappear if Marcel was to be suspected!

Hence the candle . . .

Afterward she had sat on the edge of the bed, gashing herself timidly and awkwardly, then had gone to the fireplace (the bloodstains marked her course) to throw the knife into the embers. Finally she had walked to the window and . . .

Maigret stopped sawing. From the other room came the sound of voices raised in argument. He turned abruptly, watched the door opening slowly. The fantastic yet sinister figure of Amélie Potru stood on the threshold, swathed in bandages, wearing a curious petticoat and camisole. She stared hard at Maigret while behind her Marie Lacore protested shrilly that she had no business getting out of bed.

Maigret did not have the heart to speak to her. He finished sawing open the barrel in silence. He did not even sigh contentedly when he saw the government securities and railway bonds, still curling slightly from having been rolled up and pushed through the bung.

Had he followed his inclination, he would have beat a hasty retreat, first taking a long swig of rum straight from the bottle, the way Marcel would have done.

Amélie still spoke not a word. She stood silent, her mouth partly open. If she fainted, she would fall back into the arms of Marie Lacore who, in her advanced state of pregnancy, might not be able to catch her.

Well, what of it? This was a scene from another world, another age. Maigret picked up the bonds and walked toward Amélie. She backed away from him.

He dropped the securities on the bedroom table and said to Marie Lacore, "Go get the mayor. I want him as a witness."

His voice rasped a little because his

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vocal cords were strangely tight. Then he nodded to Amélie: "You'd better get back to bed, old one."

Despite his case-hardened professional curiosity, he turned his back to her. He knew she had obeyed him, for he heard the bed springs creak. He stood looking out the window until the farmer who served as mayor of the hamlet made a timid, apologetic entrance.

There was no telephone in the village. A man on a bicycle carried the message to Vitry-aux-Loges. The gendarmes arrived at almost the same moment that the butcher's delivery truck came rolling out of the woods.

The sky shone with the same pale, raw light. The trees stirred uneasily in the west wind.

"Find anything?" asked the brigadier from the gendarmerie.

Maigret's reply was evasive. He spoke haltingly, without èlation, although he knew that the case of the Potru sisters would be the subject of long commentary and review by the criminologists not only of Paris but of London, Berlin, Vienna, even New York.

Listening to him now, the brigadier might well have suspected that Inspector Maigret was drunk — or, at least, a bit tipsy.

Solution to "DOUBLE JEOPARDY" by Cyril Hare

(*from pages 94–96*)

The Chief Constable read the sergeant's report through twice. Then he wrote on the margin: Arrest Dennison immediately. He is a bold liar, but he made one mistake. If he was taking Phyllis to an "old-tyme" dance, what was he doing in crepe rubber soles?

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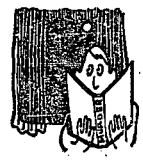
INTRODUCTION
BY ANTHONY BOUCHER

I'm grateful to Ellery Queen for the opportunity to write this unprecedented guest introduction because, to some extent, I "discovered" Daniel Nathan and his charming stories of the boy Danny. Even professional reviewers occasionally read books non-professionally; and a few years ago I happened upon an unheralded "first novel," Daniel Nathan's THE GOLDEN SUMMER *(Little, Brown, 1953). I was much taken with it (much more, I must confess, than were the mainstream-fiction reviewers), not only for its quality as a picture of childhood, but because its incidents fitted into the great short story tradition of the Rogues' Gallery; and I wrote to Queen pointing out that the shrewd ten-year-old Danny was "a Wallingford in embryo" and that his adventures deserved reprinting in EQMM.*

Why THE GOLDEN SUMMER *received little critical recognition is a matter of fashion. Today our pundits admire "psychological" fiction and can find no place for a book which, like this or Charles G. Finney's equally neglected* PAST THE END OF THE PAVEMENT, *tries to follow the Tarkington tradition of regarding childhood with good-humored affection and nostalgia. But not all of us readers were irreparably warped before puberty; and many of us find it refreshing to read a story of a sunny boyhood with no psychiatric complexities. (Though what causes Danny's recurrent and spectacular nightmares. . . ?)*

Of all the Danny episodes, "The Boy and the Book" is to me the most appealing. Like the rest of the volume, it calls up vividly the sights and scents and tastes of the past; as always, Danny is at once ingenuous and ingenious, and pretty devastating in either manner; and this particular incident has a wonderful bonus for every mystery reader and bibliophile. The year is 1915, in which, after an agonizing gap of ten years (the whole span of Danny's life till then) there appeared a new Sherlock Holmes book. Now let Mr. Nathan help you recapture (or capture) the tingly, Christmas-morning, brave-new-world sensation of such an event.



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THE ADVENTURES OF DANNY:

The Boy and the Book

by DANIEL NATHAN

THE NEXT THING DANNY KNEW, the leather-colored, muscular arm of a huge Indian — a Mohican or a Mohawk, he thought, or perhaps a "Si-oox" — was pulling on the belly of a bright-painted bow and aiming a gigantic arrow straight at Danny's heart.

Danny knew that he should run or duck or do something, but he was in a blue funk and his feet seemed to be pegged tight to the ground. The Indian suddenly began to laugh in a horrible, cackling way — exactly the way Danny's school-teacher, "old Stony-heart" of 4B, sometimes laughed — and then Danny noticed that the Indian was wearing Mr. Stone's rimless eyeglasses, with the six-cornered lenses, and that seemed odd and somehow ludicrous; but then Danny caught sight of an almost bald scalp hanging from the Indian's belt, and he wondered, with a stab of guilty elation, if Mr. Stone had been massacred.

The Indian's thumb and forefinger separated and the prodigious arrow began speeding toward Danny. For all its size, it came lickety-split, and yet, at the very same time, it appeared to be floating toward him as slow as molasses in January. Danny could almost see the progressive stages of its flight. He struggled desperately to pull his feet off the ground, but he just couldn't budge them. Then the mighty arrow thumped into his puny chest, *directly into his heart* — and Danny opened his eyes.

It was pitch-coal-inky dark all around him.

And deathly still.

So Danny knew, sure as God made little apples, that he was dead and buried. And that the blackness around him was the blackness of the inside of a coffin — a whopping big coffin. Oh, there could be no doubt about it — the proof fairly flashed through his mind. When he had gone to sleep the night before, his mother had insisted on putting a new cover around his summer blanket — maize-colored and spattered with sky-blue flowers. Even in the dark bedroom, with no discernible moonlight creeping through the window that faced the back yard, Danny had been able to distinguish the wan paleness of the new cover. But now, lying on his back, his diminutive body stiff as a board and his toothpick arms flat against his undernourished sides, he gazed straight ahead of him and saw, where

Earlier version in THE GOLDEN SUMMER

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the pale yellow cover should have been, only an impenetrable and suffocating blackness. And there were no dimly outlined panes on the back wall of his bedroom where the window should have been.

But if he was lying outstretched in a coffin —

A terrifying thought began to crawl over him. If he was dead and buried, *how could he be thinking?* Dead people don't think; they just lie in their coffins and slowly crumble to dust.

Only then did the full truth dawn on Danny.

He was buried alive!

—How could they have done this to him? What had happened? Had he taken ill during the night, lapsed into a coma which Dr. Sobell, the family physician, had mistaken for death — something like what happened in *Nick Carter's Greatest Peril; or, A Prisoner for Life with the Dead*, which Danny had just finished the night before, reading by flashlight under the cover — and been buried before he had regained consciousness?

In his mind's eye Danny could see the funeral procession, his weeping parents, his pals walking slowly behind the hearse, all of them enjoying an unexpected day off from school — And then he remembered: the fellows wouldn't get away with that! It was still summer vacation.

Danny clutched at the dead blackness in front of him — and his hand pushed aside the dark blue Dan Beard blanket that his mother sometimes put over him, after he had fallen asleep, when summer nights turned suddenly chilly; and from under the dark blanket, now that Danny's eyes were more accustomed to the absence of light, came the tremendously welcome paleness of the new blanket cover with its sky-blue flowers.

It had all been a dream. The Indian, the arrow in his heart, even Mr. Stone's scalp — all one of Danny's nightmares, for which he was justifiably considered "some punkins" among his friends. Now, this one had been a humdinger! Danny could hardly wait to begin telling it to Chad and Sartorious, the two other members of the TGH, Danny's secret society. And already he was adding certain delectable details which would embellish and enhance even a Danny Nathan nightmare . . .

The next morning Danny's father forgot to take back with him a bundle of the latest style books, on which he had worked at home the previous night — *Sample Book No. 81, Spring and Summer 1915, Men's Clothes Tailored to Measure* (from Sears, Roebuck and Co.); *Dress* ("The Monthly Epitome of the World's Best Fashions"); and a curious periodical titled *Croonborg's Gazette of Fashions*.

Danny was sent downtown to his father's tailor shop to deliver the package. On his way home Danny passed the window of MacGreevy's Book Store, on East Water Street, between Lake and Baldwin, and an unfamiliar oblong caught his eye.

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It was a hand-lettered sign advertising a new book. The sign read:

NEWEST
EXPLOIT OF
WONDERFUL
SLEUTH

THE VALLEY OF FEAR

First new Sherlock Holmes story in ten years!

$1.25

Danny gazed with rapture at the book lying at the foot of the sign. The dust jacket showed a group of six people in a mysterious brown-paneled room, with the Great Detective easily recognizable by his deerstalker hat and sharp-featured profile. In the foreground was a massive table whose domed lamp shed a pale light on what was obviously an assortment of baffling clues. Five of the six people were men and their eyes were focused questioningly on the sixth person, a sad-faced woman dressed in what looked to Danny like an orange-colored kimono, trimmed with white fur.

The whole scene was exciting and elegant!

The new Sherlock Holmes story! The first new one in ten years — that's what the sign said, so it must be true, even though Danny had read other Sherlock Holmes stories in the past year. But none of the others, it seemed to Danny, had as blood-tingling a title as this new one — *The Valley of Fear!*

Danny just couldn't restrain himself. He ran headlong into the store and ferreted around among the tables and shelves until he found another copy of the new Sherlock Holmes story. Gingerly he picked up the book and opened it. The frontispiece leaped at him, and even a hurried glimpse increased his agitation. It portrayed three men in a moment of tense drama: one was obviously Sherlock Holmes himself, dressed in a long gown, formal-looking trousers, a bow tie, and spats; another was readily identifiable as Dr. Watson — he wore a bushy little mustache and was smoking a cigar; the third was a complete stranger to Danny, but one glance at his strained, set face and Danny knew the man was in desperate trouble. The caption under the illustration made Danny's heart turn over: WHAT'S THIS, MR. HOLMES? MAN, IT'S WITCHCRAFT! WHERE IN THE NAME OF ALL THAT'S WONDERFUL DID YOU GET THOSE NAMES?

Danny sighed tremulously.

Once again the game was afoot!

Quickly he scanned the dust wrapper of the book to find out what it cost — in his excitement he had forgotten the price mentioned on the sign in the window. Ah, there it was — in red numerals in the middle of the backbone — $1.25 net. If only he had enough money to buy the book! But $1.25 was not a picayune sum to a ten-year-old boy; indeed, it was a

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considerable fortune to spend — even for a work of art, even for one of the world's undisputed treasures.

As Danny stood there, fondling the book and wishing for the unattainable, the owner himself came over.

"And what can I do for you, little man? That's the very newest Sherlock Holmes book — I have only a few copies left in stock. Would you like to buy one, young man?"

Usually Danny hated being called "little man" and "young man." But with the new Sherlock Holmes book in his hands he barely noticed. He was too choked with a kind of wild emotion to answer in words. He just shook his head pathetically.

Mr. MacGreevy looked into Danny's eyes, and he observed how Danny held the book — as if it were, at the very least, a First Folio of Shakespeare.

"Do you like Sherlock Holmes stories, my boy?"

This time Danny found words. They came tumbling out. "Oh yes sir, they're my special favorites. I'd rather read a Sherlock Holmes book than — than — anything!"

"Do you have any at home?"

"Oh yes sir. I get one nearly every birthday and sometimes when I'm sick. I guess I got nearly a hunderd of 'em."

Mr. MacGreevy nodded gravely, his eyes twinkling.

"And when is your next birthday?"

"Oh not for months and months yet — not till all the way till next October."

"I see . . . And do you ever try to get Sherlock Holmes books from the library?"

"Oh yes sir, but they have only the old ones. The lib'ary don't get no new ones till — oh, till loads of time after they first come out."

Mr. MacGreevy knew that was approximately true. He nodded his head once more, and looked into Danny's eyes; and there must have been something in those deep brown eyes, something so appealing, so irresistible, that Mr. MacGreevy decided to do something he had never done before.

"What's your name, boy?"

"Daniel Nathan, sir."

"Oh, you're the son of Moore Nathan who has the tailor shop up the street? Mr. Nathan is your father?"

"Yes sir," replied Danny eagerly. The questions seemed to Danny to be taking a favorable turn — he didn't know exactly why, but his intuition, which often seemed infallible, told him that he might be on the brink of a happy event.

"Daniel, do you read fast?"

"Oh yes sir, I can read fast as anything." Danny tapped the book in his hand gently. "I could read this book in one day easy — easy as pie."

"I see . . . hm . . . And when you read a book, Daniel, do you keep it clean?"

"Oh yes sir! I hardly *touch* it, sir."

"If I should let you take this new Sherlock Holmes book home with you, would you promise to bring it

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back to-morrow, with no stains on it, no dirt or smudges, no wrinkles or creases in the pages — just as nice and bright as it is now?"

Danny could hardly believe his big ears. His nickel-plated eyeglasses, with lenses larger than silver dollars, misted up and words of gratitude poured out of him without restraint. Mr. MacGreevy suddenly felt better than he remembered having felt in years. He took the copy of *The Valley of Fear*, wrapped it carefully, and handed it to the ecstatic boy. And Danny floated out of the store, the precious book hugged to his pigeon chest. It seemed to Danny that he floated all the way home.

It was long past midnight when Danny, propped up against two pillows in his bed, came to the final paragraphs of the book . . . "*No, I don't say that,*" *said Holmes, and his eyes seemed to be looking far into the future.*

Danny paused, and his own eyes seemed to be looking far into the future. Then he went back to the last page.

"*I don't say that he can't be beat* [Holmes went on]. *But you must give me time — you must give me time!*"

Again Danny paused and gazed dreamily at the ceiling of his bedroom. "*You must give me time!*" Somehow they sounded like fateful words, and Danny had the frightening thought, deep inside of him, that the words were meant for him, only for him. He sat there in bed, and as if he were foretelling his own future, as if he were piercing the veil of what was to be, he echoed Sherlock Holmes's words: "You must give me time — you must give me time!"

The minutes passed and Danny lay back, reliving the glorious adventure that had been his from the moment he had started reading the book. It had only been this morning — but how long ago it seemed! And now, in the unearthly quiet of the night, he came to the conclusion that *The Valley of Fear* was just about the bestest book he had ever read in his whole life. The glow of it was still inside of him, as he murmured to himself: "It feels just like when you are getting better after being sick."

Finally, Danny got out of bed and put the book carefully on his small chiffonier. He snapped off the flashlight by which he had been reading — lucky the batteries had lasted! — and climbed back into bed.

Then a slowly awakening fear began to stir inside of him — like a little mouse. Suppose his mother or father came into his bedroom before he woke up the next morning? They might see the book — the shiny new book. They would certainly ask questions. Where did he get it? Who gave it to him? They would see at once that it was not a book from the only library in town, the Steele Memorial Library. Something told him that his father would be angry — taking a book like that from Mr. MacGreevy! Maybe he had better hide the book, so that no one would see it, or know

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about it, until after he had returned the book safely the next day.

So Danny got out of bed, switched on the flashlight again, picked up the book, and debated where to hide it. In one of the drawers in the chiffonier? No, his mother might look in there too, if she were putting away his shirts and stockings. And then he had an inspiration. In his bed! No one could see it there!

Danny lifted the cover of his striped mattress and placed the book, front cover down, on the bedspring, between the open coils and the bottom of the mattress. And then he went to sleep, easily the happiest boy on High Street, if not in the entire world . . .

The next morning Danny woke gay as a lark. He dressed in his newest pair of peg-top knickerbockers, put on a clean white shirt with a starched box plait in front, carefully selected a Surah silk Windsor tie, buttoned his elkskin shoes, slipped his rah-rah hat under his arm, and stuck his hand under the mattress for the new Sherlock Holmes book.

One glance at the book and all the lark went out of him.

The pressure of the mattress on the springs had bent the book so that, despite all his frantic attempts to straighten it, the book still looked crooked; also, the wire springs had left visible marks on the colored front wrapper — indentations which went right through the wrapper and showed plainly on the front cover of the book itself.

The book was damaged! It was no longer new-looking, no longer bright and clean and crisp. It was no longer in the condition in which Danny had given his "word and honor" to return it. And there was nothing he could do — not a single thing — to restore the book to its original grandeur!

Danny walked to MacGreevy's Book Store as slowly and deliberately as he could. He was careful, wherever there were sidewalks, not to step on any lines. And on the curbs he walked tightrope fashion, often retracing his steps if there was the slightest doubt as to the mathematical precision or the delicate nicety of his reluctant progress.

But, alas and alack, he could not prevent finally reaching his destination. Even so, he paced back and forth in front of the bookstore exactly seven times before he could screw up sufficient courage to take the book inside. And when he could not delay the issue another second, when eventually he took the plunge, disaster overtook him at once.

Mr. MacGreevy examined the book and his face clouded.

Danny sputtered: "Was — was an — an accident, sir. I — I —"

But he could go no further. He had practiced a detailed and convincing explanation — one that he thought might save the situation — but when the time came, he could not get a word of it out. He was too heartsick, and ashamed.

Mr. MacGreevy regretted his fool-

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ish impulse to make a small boy happy. He decided not to mince words with this ungrateful puppy, and spoke even more sternly than Mr. Benedict, the principal of Danny's school.

"You've spoiled the book! No, I don't care to hear any excuses — the book is ruined! Now you will have to buy it. Do you have a dollar and twenty-five cents, young man?"

Danny burst into tears. Mr. MacGreevy suddenly felt panicky. He glanced round the store — fortunately there were no other customers. Despite all his resolutions Mr. MacGreevy softened.

"Now, now, my boy, I'll give you time. Suppose you have the dollar and a quarter here by — let's say the end of the week. But no later, mind you! Otherwise I will have to tell your father."

Danny knew that particular threat was inevitable. Nearly every day of his life, it seemed, someone was saying to him, "I'll tell your father." Now he nodded his tiny head, tears streaming down his face. Perhaps more than anything else, he was ashamed of those tears. They were a deeper humiliation than his broken word about the condition of the book. He had never cried like this before, but although he tried as hard as he could, he could not stop the tears from gushing out.

When a boy's heart is full, his eyes flow over.

"I'll — I'll — bring the money, sir. By the end of this week, just like you say, Mr. MacGreevy. But please don't tell my father — *please!*"

Mr. MacGreevy was a kindly man. He couldn't resist those eyes of Danny, in ecstasy or in grief. He patted Danny's rumpled hair and felt sorry for the little shaver.

"All right, son, you bring the money by the end of this week and I'll keep the whole thing a secret — just between us."

Danny blubbered. "Th-thanks, Mr. MacGreevy. We'll keep it a secret — just between you and I."

Then Danny walked out of the bookstore. But he didn't float this time — he clumped heavily, the burden of the ages on his bony shoulders. He carried the crooked, marked book with him, hiding it under his Norfolk jacket. And all the way home he wrestled with the gigantic problem: How was he going to raise $1.25?

The solution came to Danny late that afternoon. It was so simple he wondered how in the world it had escaped him so long. He attributed his slowness to his upset condition — he still flushed every time he envisioned the twisted spine of the new Sherlock Holmes book.

Yes, there was a way out. He would run a lottery!

He was sure he could talk the fellows into paying five cents for a chance at winning the latest Sherlock Holmes book. If he could sell even twenty chances at a nickel a chance, he would at least avert bankruptcy . . .

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Just before supper he prepared the lottery tickets, in duplicate. Hopefully, he made out more tickets than he needed. In financial matters Danny was always the optimist. And just as soon as supper was over — if you could call what Danny ate that night supper — he began making the rounds.

The selling of the tickets took Danny longer than he figured on and more persuasive sales talks than he had ever made before. But by suppertime two days later Danny sat in the TGH clubhouse — the partially renovated chicken coop in the Nathan back yard — and totaled his receipts. He was in the clear. The drawing was scheduled for the next morning at ten, in front of Barnaby's barn.

The boys holding lottery tickets — each worth a queen's ransom — gathered early in the lane off John Street. There was a farm wagon in front of the barn, loaded with bales of hay. Danny had borrowed a fish bowl from home; he had put the goldfish and the water into his mother's gray enameled ware coffeepot — the only container he could lay his hands on in a hurry — and had hidden the swishing pot near the coal bin in the cellar. It was imperative, therefore, that he get back as quickly as possible — before his mother noticed anything missing, either in the kitchen or in the sitting room, where the fish bowl usually stood, between the family album and a framed daguerreotype on the marble-topped table.

So, briskly, Danny mounted to the top of the bales of hay on the wagon, exhibited the gleaming fish bowl crammed with the duplicate lottery tickets, and prepared to stick his skinny hand into the bowl and bring out the winning number. But an unexpected difficulty arose as Danny was pushing up the right sleeve of his jacket.

"No fair! We don't want *you* to draw the winning ticket!"

"No sir! We got to have an outsider!"

"Yeah, that would be much more better!"

"Look here, Danny — we know *you!* You might just arrange somehow some way to pick out one of your best friend's tickets — like Chad or Sart here."

"Yeah, you're prej'iced!"

Danny began to worry. He had counted on being back home with the empty fish bowl in a few minutes at the most. Otherwise —

He tried to hurry matters along. "How about asking Mr. Herman to pick for us?" Mr. Herman was the neighborhood shoe-repair man.

"Old butterfingers Sartorious's Pop? No *sir!*"

"But everybody trusts Mr. Herman!"

"Nope, it's got to be a real outsider!"

Danny then suggested Old Man Tobias, the owner of the dry-goods store — no, his son, familiarly known as Toby, also had a stake in the drawing. After three more futile

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nominations, Danny, getting desperate now, hit upon the perfect "drawrer."

"How about Mrs. Fitzgerald?"

There was a little wrangling, but finally all the ticket holders agreed to let the little old lady who ran the ice-cream and penny-candy store officiate. So all the boys trooped down the lane, with little minnow Danny in the fore, clutching the fish bowl to his chest, and assembled outside Mrs. Fitzgerald's tiny boothlike store.

Before Danny could explain their predicament, a diversion occurred. The minds of ten-year-old boys, especially on a warm summer day, are like grasshoppers — they flit effortlessly from one enterprise to another, requiring no visible current to direct them here, there, or anywhere, changing course on impulse, drifting or tarrying at whim, and returning as the spirit or fancy moves. Thus, despite the imminence of a great event, the boys took time out to peer at the trays of candy and scrutinize the glinting edible jewels that were Mrs. Fitzgerald's heavenly wares.

Tempting ambrosias indeed . . . there were chocolate babies, chocolate marshmallow twists, and chocolate bark; multicolored jelly beans and multishaped "Kidlet Mixed" — luscious monkeys, birds, butterflies, bugles, rabbits, elephants, fish, shoes; gum drops and hoarhound "lozengers" and sweet pickles; Baby Bottle and Liberty Bell and All-Day suckers; thin, red, heart-shaped mints with *I Love You Truly* in white script; irresistible Goo-Goo Eyes, mouth-watering Kum-Bak Peanut Bars, toothsome cocoanut watermelon; and two whole shelves filled with a scrumptious-smelling assortment of Danny's special-favorite candy — licorice — "lickrish" whistles and wheels, Teddy Black Bears, fluted tubes, buttons and bricks, pickaninnies, cigarettes and pipes, Pittsburgh Stogies (with bands) and navy plugs ("chewing tobacker"), pistols, golf sticks, frying pans, and Big Lorimers; — none of the aristocratic confections that grown-ups seemed so partial to, like satiny opera sticks and crystallized Canton ginger.

Danny made up his mind first — he was anxious to get the boys back to the main business in hand. So he quickly bought a penny's worth of shoestring licorice, and after the other fellows had made their penny choices, Danny outlined the problem to Mrs. Fitzgerald. She said she would be glad to draw the winning ticket for them. She proceeded to put on her pince-nez glasses — which added dignity to her rosy face but made her virtually blind — and fumbled for the fish bowl, her fragile little hand finally landing on the top of Danny's head. Danny steered her hand to the fish bowl, being extra-careful not to touch the bowl himself and thus cause a possible disqualification.

"Mix up all the tickets first, Mrs. Fitzgerald — that's right, rowel 'em up good . . . All right, fellas, here she comes!"

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Mrs. Fitzgerald plucked a slip of paper, delicately drew it out, and handed it to Danny.

"Here it is — the winn-n-ning number — Number Seven! Who's got Number Seven, the lucky number?"

The boys hastily consulted their tickets. There were groans and grimaces of disappointment. Then Owgoost, son of the neighborhood blacksmith, bellowed:

"I got it! Good old Number Seven — right here in my hand!"

Owgoost extended a brawny paw — he was the biggest and strongest boy around.

"Give me the book! Hooray, I winned, I winned!"

The other boys began to drift away. There was no possibility of collusion, and even if a doubt or two still lingered in some of their minds, no one argued with Owgoost — no one who had any sense in his dome.

Danny, more anxious than ever to get back home and restore the goldfish to their proper habitat, said swiftly to Owgoost:

"I got the book home. I got to take back the fish bowl pronto — you meet me at the barn and I'll fetch the book in three shakes. Just you wait for me at the barn."

Owgoost glowered. "You be there — no monkeyshines now!"

Danny ran home, did a speedy job transferring the goldfish, replaced the coffeepot (unwashed), snatched the book, and raced back to the barn.

Owgoost grabbed his prize and scanned it. His face darkened. Danny was about to leave when Owgoost clutched him by the tails of his Norfolk jacket.

"Just one second, bo! What are you trying to palm off on me, you little squirt?"

"Why, what's wrong, Owgoost? That's the newest Sherlock Holmes book, just like I said."

"Maybe it is, but you said it was a *brand-new* book. Just you look at it — all crooked like someone tried to break it in two. And look at them marks and stuff. This ain't no new book like you promised!"

This was a totally unexpected development. Danny had never anticipated that the lottery winner, whoever it turned out to be, would examine the book with the fastidiousness of a bibliophile. He had counted on the mere fact that it was the newest Sherlock Holmes story to satisfy anyone who had invested a mere five cents.

He attempted to reason with Owgoost.

"The insides of the book are perfect — all the words and pictures are there! Nothing is missing, honest! Who cares about the *shape* of a —"

"I care! You said a *brand-new* book and I winned and I want a brand-new book!" Owgoost paused. He shifted his grip to Danny's scrawny neck. "Or else, bub, I'll tear you apart."

Danny was now trembling. A quick analysis of his new predicament had got him nowhere. He obviously

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could not go back to MacGreevy's Book Store and buy another copy: that would cost him $1.25 and he would be right back where he started. Then, too, there wasn't a ghost of a chance of inducing the fellows to pony up for a second lottery — not even, he decided without hesitation, if he went and called it a raffle.

Owgoost squeezed.

A bright memory flashed in Danny's brain — the memory of a trick he had heard the upstate farmers talk about and chuckle over, when they were swapping yarns around the hot stove or cracker barrel on a long winter's night. According to the farmers, the trick was "older than Methuselah." It went far back into the mists of time — all the way to before the dawn of the Christian era, when Arab horse traders probably first invented it.

And now that ancient stratagem came to Danny's rescue.

He turned to Owgoost and assumed his most worldly air.

"Look here, Owgoost. I got a proposition to make you. This book cost you only five cents. Right?"

Owgoost looked puzzled. Then his eyes narrowed with growing suspicion.

Danny drove on, in his smoothest vein. "For five cents the book ain't in the advertised condition, so you ain't satisfied. Right? So I'll tell you what I'm going to do. Suppose the book didn't cost you five cents? Suppose the book didn't cost you *anything*? Then it would be worth it to you, wouldn't it?"

Owgoost still looked puzzled and suspicious. He had no head for figures.

Danny took the leap. "I mean, Owgoost, that right here and now I'm handing back your whole entire investment. Yep, here's the nickel you gave me for your winning ticket. Here, *take* it."

Owgoost had not yet digested the significance of Danny's proposal. He accepted the nickel bewilderedly.

"There! Now you got your money back and the book's still yours and it didn't cost you nothing — nothing at all!"

The full impact of the bargain now hit Owgoost.

"Say, that *is* fair, ain't it! Yeah, that's different! I got my money back, I keep the book, and —"

"Just like it is, you understand!" interposed Danny.

"Aw that's all right, Danny. Suppose the book is a little out of shape — so what? *I* don't mind." Owgoost released Danny's neck and slapped him on the back. It was meant to be a friendly, playful gesture, but Danny reeled. "Always said you were a square shooter, Danny-boy, always said exackly that."

And Owgoost strutted off, a completely satisfied customer.

That afternoon Danny paid Mr. MacGreevy in full.

$1.15.

He had visited Mr. MacGreevy the previous day and persuaded him to take two chances, for ten cents, on

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the lottery. Danny was gravely apologetic when he reported that Mr. MacGreevy had not proved to be the holder of the lucky number.

Mr. MacGreevy watched Danny leave the bookstore and start down East Water Street. He could not help murmuring to himself: "Never saw the beat of that boy. He'll own the town some day."

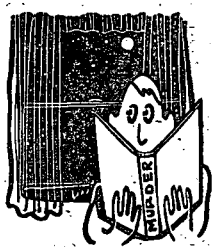
Danny turned off Water Street into Madison Avenue, and then off Madison into John Street. All the way home he consulted his notebook entries, computing the results of the lottery.

Chad had bought the largest number of chances — four. Sartorious had been Danny's next best customer — Sart had bought three tickets. Eleven other boys had purchased nineteen chances among them. The two tickets Danny had sold to his father, and the single ticket to his mother, had required the wiliest of explanations . . .

Twenty-nine chances at five cents each — that came to $1.45. He crossed out Owgoost's name on the notebook page, remembering the grim circumstances under which he had found it expedient to refund Owgoost's nickel. That reduced the grand total to $1.40. From this he subtracted the $1.15 he had paid Mr. MacGreevy.

Net: $.25.

And it is said that you can't get two skins off a fox . . .



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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **WALT SHELDON**

TITLE: ***To Break the Weave***

TYPE: U. S. Military Police

DETECTIVE: Sergeant Carl Dixon

LOCALE: Tokyo, Japan

TIME: Post-World War II

COMMENTS: *The fine, sensitive story of an American soldier in the C.I.D., married a year to a lovely Japanese girl and "still falling in love," and of the two-worlds problem they faced together . . .*

THE OTHERS KNEW THAT RENTARO was in there somewhere; Carl knew exactly where. Carl hesitated now, at the entrance of the warren.

"Let's go," said Rossiter, who was thin and nervous.

"In a minute," said Carl.

"You said that a minute ago."

"I know," said Carl.

The alleys ran like brambles, and the shops and bars and cheap geisha houses (their inmates were not true geisha) grew about them like jungle plants. Paper lanterns bobbled overhead; bright little awnings topped most of the doorways; bold, decorative Japanese characters were splashed everywhere — on glass, metal, and polished wood. But in some places plastic had replaced the paper lanterns, and Carl heard an overmodulated loudspeaker trying to drown out a samisen.

Rossiter said, "I don't know what you're waiting for."

"Getting my bearings."

"I'll bet," said Rossiter.

Carl tried to pretend he didn't know Rossiter was looking at him. You had to pretend sometimes. He'd had to pretend this morning that he didn't know Chiisato knew what he was going to do today — they had both pretended to each other. She didn't know exactly, of course, but she had the idea. She would have to be deaf, blind, brainless and even more in love with him not to know.

"Maybe you don't want to go through with it," Rossiter said.

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Carl turned and looked at him dully. "Did I ever say it?"

"Say what?"

"That I wanted to go through with it?"

"You took the job, didn't you? You didn't have to take the job."

"Yes, I took it. But I never said I wanted to."

"I can't figure you out," said Rossiter.

"Don't try."

"I just wonder whose side you're on sometimes."

"Don't try to figure that out, either."

Rossiter shrugged, overdoing it.

He's afraid of me, thought Carl. Not because I'd hurt him immediately or take away anything he wanted, but because I represent what he doesn't believe in. I'm his natural enemy. He doesn't exactly know that himself — he doesn't think clearly enough to know it in so many words. But he sensed it a long time ago. He sensed it a lot faster than I could think it out.

"Everybody's waiting," said Rossiter.

There was Carl and Rossiter and there were a dozen detectives from the Tokyo Metropolitan Police, headed by Inspector Hosokawa, who spoke English and who usually acted as liaison man in cases like this one. Technically, Carl and Rossiter were only there as observers; the detectives would make the actual arrest. Rentaro was a Japanese national and the C.I.D. — the Military Police Criminal Investigation Division — had no jurisdiction over him. Whatever the fine points, Carl was deep into the thing. He had the feeling that he couldn't have prevented it. When Captain Barker learned that Rentaro Sugaya was his brother-in-law it was already begun. It was logical to Captain Barker. Rentaro handles blackmarket operations for The Happy Dragon gang. Sergeant Carl Dixon is married to Rentaro's sister. Sergeant Carl Dixon's primary duty is that of investigator. Therefore Sergeant Carl Dixon is in the best position to investigate Rentaro's blackmarket activities.

Carl had done it, and he had learned very little, because Rentaro was not completely a moron, and because The Happy Dragons always covered their tracks cleverly. But now Rentaro had killed a man. Only last night. They didn't know all of it, but they knew a G.I. had met Rentaro in a cheap hotel to deliver stolen watches, and they knew there must have been a quarrel because the room was upset and spattered with blood. The surgeon counted eleven stab wounds and signed the death certificate. The woman who ran the hotel identified Rentaro for Inspector Hosokawa and his men.

That's right, thought Carl; he did kill a man.

"Okay," he said aloud, and started forward, leading the others.

The alleys were crowded. The warren was a section of several square blocks devoted mainly to cheap en-

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tertainment: *pachinko*, or pinball parlors; tiny bars that served cheap *sake* or the cheaper *shyo-chu*, made of potatoes; and shops or stalls whose owners nearly all dealt in the black-market on the side. They pushed in among the people. Several men jostled Rossiter, cutting him off from Carl for a moment.

"*Joto!*" said Rossiter angrily, pushing his way back.

"What's that mean?" asked Carl.

"What do you mean, what does it mean? *Joto — joto motty* — you know what it means."

"*Chotto matte*," said Carl. "'Wait a minute.' If you have to try to speak it, say it right."

Rossiter looked half annoyed, half disgusted. "What's the difference?"

"Forget it," said Carl.

There was a dirty taste in his mouth. Rossiter and Captain Barker and a few thousand others, they were just here on a tour of duty. There really was no reason why they had to learn to pronounce the language well or understand the people more than superficially. Yet it always sickened him when they didn't. He didn't wholly belong to them any more. On the other hand, he was still an American, still a soldier, and didn't wholly belong to Chiisato's people, either. This was a matter of feeling, not of fealty —

And he thought of Chiisato as he had seen her this morning. At breakfast he had looked at her across the low, lacquered *chabu-dai* and, as always, he had admired the silken play of her head and arms as she scooped rice into his bowl with a wooden paddle. Every morning he ate a fried egg on his rice and sprinkled it with toasted seaweed. A half-and-half breakfast they called this, laughing. They laughed a lot. They were happy; they were wondrously in love. They had been married a year and they were still falling in love.

So he had hated doing what he had done this morning. He had left, then sneaked back to the house, and had waited, hidden, until Chiisato had come out, carrying a bundled *firoshuki* scarf. He had followed her. She had looked back several times (in technical police language you called that "surveillance consciousness") but Carl knew how to follow. She had led him to this warren, then in among the alleys, and he had watched her talk with Rentaro, earnestly, furtively, and at great length.

At the field office, later in the day, Carl had helped set up the arrest. "You don't have to go on it yourself," Captain Barker had said, looking at him steadily. Carl had not bothered to answer.

He walked on now, remembering the way, recalling a sharp turn here at a *sushi* shop with its little canapes of rice and brick-red tuna in the window, then down a narrow corridor that didn't seem an alley at first, but widened later on. Now past an open fish market with a dozen kinds of fish laid out in the open trays, glistening, the sea still upon them — black mackerel, pink sea bream and octo-

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pus, mottled gray or boiled to a bright vermilion. The sea was never very far in Japan. That didn't mean much, but it was one of the little things you got to know, and after you started to put some of these little things together you started to see the country from the inside, the way its people saw it.

Then Carl stopped suddenly. Chiisato was ahead, standing quietly in the middle of the alley. She was wearing her kimono. She wore it sometimes on ceremonial occasions.

"You stay here," he said to Rossiter, and went forward.

He thought she would speak first, but she did not; she did not even bow slightly. He received her stare for a while, trying to keep his own face as expressionless as hers.

Finally he said, "You know what I'm here for."

"Yes."

She was taut, delicately taut, like the parchment on a samisen. You could feel at a distance the quivering of her mind.

"How did you know I was coming here?" he asked.

She moved her eyes just a little to one side, then back again, and that was a shrug. She did everything that way — in small brushstrokes.

"Listen, Chii-chyan — you understand I have to do this, don't you?"

It seemed that she wanted to nod, but changed her mind before she could move her head. Instead of nodding she said, "Why?"

He felt like a man in mid-air. He wanted to explain, but there was no time to explain at length, and there were no words to explain quickly. Call it the language barrier. But so far and for the most part there had been no language barrier between them; they had always been forced to talk mostly of essentials, and it was the frills, the little vanities, not the essentials that always led to spats, and so they had never really quarreled. They had been so lucky to have come together. Nearly two years before, Carl had gone into a toy shop in the Ginza to buy a model airplane for his nephew back in the States, and she had been there, selling toys. They had called her to wait on him because she could speak a little English. Then he had seen her again several times, and on their first date he had taken her to a movie — it was all pretty much as if he had met her back home in Eastern Colorado. They had even had ice cream sodas in the Ernie Pyle snack bar after the movie.

How to make the Rossiters and the Barkers and the thousands of others understand this now? He had not picked her up in a serviceman's dance hall and taken her to a cheap hotel an hour later. She had not married him so that she would be able to get American shoes cheaply in the P.X. And you did not have to speak to her in words of one syllable, mostly G.I.-slang and the new occupation-pidgin, to make her understand. Most of all, how could he get it across to them that they were really in love, and that they were both capable of love?

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"Karru-san," she said. In moments of tenderness she pronounced his name in this softer way.

"Yes?"

"Please understanding. Rentaro-san is my brother. Same family."

"Yes. I understand that."

But he knew he didn't understand in the same way that she did. He understood better than most Americans, yes; he understood the family obligations, the woven relationships that began, always, with the family, then spread out to the school group, the club, the city, the prefecture — in Rentaro's case the *yakuza*, or gang — and eventually to the nation. Break the weave in any one place and it all started to fall apart. To break it was everything from bad manners to blasphemy — with a touch of treason thrown in. He understood this, but imperfectly.

"Is Rentaro still in there?" he asked. The others, back a few paces, could not hear them.

"Yes, Karru-san."

"I have to go in and get him then."

"He is same your family. Half your family now."

"Darling — he killed a man."

"So. This very bad, I know. *Dakedo* — but —" She hesitated.

"He ought to be caught, but *we* shouldn't do anything to help catch him, is that it?"

She nodded delicately.

"But you understand this is my job, don't you? I mean you can understand that a *little*. As much as I can understand your way."

"Other people can do the job, Karru-san. Not you."

"No. That's not the point."

"Karru-san —"

"You're not trying to understand, darling."

"Karru-san, please. Do not go to Rentaro-san now. You show them some other place. Later, somebody else can find Rentaro-san. Not *you*. You show them some other place and say, 'Mistake — *gomen-nasai* — I am sorry.' "

"No, I can't do that."

He saw the quiet tears come along. "You are *family*, Karru-san. You cannot break family connection!"

"It's not breaking anything."

"Yes! Breaking!" Her underlip quivered for a moment, then she said, "If you break I must go home."

"Home?"

But he knew what she meant. Back to a small room above a candy shop where she had lived with her mother before they were married. Back to selling toys, perhaps. Away from him, wherever it was — and then he wouldn't be whole any more, just a restless shell of a kid who had joined the Army to keep from being drafted and didn't know, and didn't care, what he would do when he got out of the Army — if, indeed, he ever took the trouble to get out.

"Listen, darling. Listen, now. They all tried to tell us we couldn't make it work. East is east and west is west — that old routine. Your people and my people, both. But we showed them they were wrong, didn't we? So far?

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Because we love each other, darling—"

They stared at each other, startled, afraid, in pain, and they needed no words. There was his way and her way, and there was no time, not in their separate lifetimes, for either to fully understand the other's way. One had to simply accept surrender, as the faithful simply accept dogma, for that was the only way it would work.

Carl made a last effort. "Look — Rentaro killed a man. He's got to pay for that — that's Japanese law, too, isn't it?"

"Sometime they find Rentaro. Sometime he pay."

"Then what's the difference — whether I find him or someone else does?"

At that moment Rossiter called out from behind. "Come on, Carl! Let's get the show on the road!"

It broke a strand somewhere — a last strand. Chiisato turned suddenly, gathering up her kimono skirt in the same motion, then ran — not toward Rentaro's hiding place, but past Carl, and in the opposite direction. Everyone stared in her wake for a moment, then Rossiter trotted up to Carl, and put a hand on his shoulder. "You okay?"

Carl shrugged the hand away and said, "I'm okay. Don't worry about me."

"I know it's tough," said Rossiter. "Him being your brother-in-law and everything. But we got a job — right?"

"Shut up," said Carl.

"What?"

Carl turned again and looked down the alley, toward where they had been heading in the first place. Finally he faced Rossiter again and said, "I'm going in there by myself."

"By *yourself*?"

"You heard me."

"Look, Carl, let's not go ape on this—"

"You stay here. I'll bring Rentaro out."

"The hell you will."

Instead of answering Carl beckoned to Inspector Hosokawa, who moved forward and nodded thoughtfully when Carl told him what he wanted to do. Hosokawa was stocky, apple-faced, wore horn-rims and a Chaplin mustache. He scratched his head when Carl finished speaking, and took in some breath.

Rossiter stared at him. "You're not going to let him, are you?"

"Maybe we better try it his way first," said Hosokawa amiably.

Rossiter looked about him helplessly. "You're *both* crazy!"

"Don't worry about it," said Carl.

"I just don't get it, that's all!"

"Don't try to. Just stay here."

Carl went forward alone. He felt a little drunk now — no, not quite drunk, more like coming out of an anesthetic. Everything outside himself was blurred, but everything inside was suddenly remarkably clear. Why he had insisted on taking the job, for instance. Before he had dimly sensed that it was necessary — now he knew

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exactly why. If someone else from his office had helped to catch Rentaro, the thing would always stand between Chiisato and himself — it would not be spoken of, but it would be there, like an ember, ready to set fire to any small resentment. She would always see Carl as part of the C.I.D., just as she always saw herself as part of her family, her school, her Buddhist *shyu-ya*, her tribal nation. Thus if *any* of his colleagues helped apprehend Rentaro her emotions would always blame *him* for it. But if he went after Rentaro himself the thing would be forced into the open, and she would have to side either with her family, or with him, and after that they would know forever just where matters stood, and that was better than wondering.

Well, she had made her decision. He didn't have to wonder any more. Yet he still had a chance — there was still one way to keep her from leaving — and this was why he was going after Rentaro alone.

He stood in front of a small bar and looked up, toward the window of the room above it. This morning when he had followed Chiisato he had seen Rentaro talk to her from this window. It was an ordinary Japanese sliding window, and it was now partly open.

"*Rentaro!*"

He waited, and a moment later called again.

"Rentaro! I'm down here alone! You understand? Alone!"

People in the alley stared at Carl. Some stopped, others moved along. A barmaid in a cheap, pink kimono stuck her round face from the doorway and looked at him blankly, her bewilderment painted upon her.

Then the window moved aside a little and he saw Rentaro's sharp, triangular face. The boy was pale. His long hair hung in strands over his cheekbones — Carl remembered how vain he had always been about his hair, and how he had kept it combed and oiled, brushed into a little duck's tail in back. Sometimes he looked like a real Stateside sharpie. More so. An eager beaver, Rentaro. A gang boy who sometimes thought of himself as a real western-style hood, and wore long jackets with padded shoulders and dark sun glasses to prove it; but at other times he thought of himself as a kind of picaresque *samurai*, loyal to the *yakuza*, bound by its code, having no purpose but to swing a big two-handed sword for it, and having no real identity of his own without it. A real split personality, Rentaro — a caricature of a hood, both comic and dangerous.

"Listen, Rentaro, you're coming with me. You're going to give yourself up."

Rentaro laughed. Carl knew enough to understand that a Japanese man often laughs when he is embarrassed.

"Carl," said Rentaro. "You go away. I don't want hurt you."

The kid had a nice voice, deep and strident, like a kabuki actor's. He spoke even better English than Chiisato's, though he had never studied; but he had worked as a houseboy in an

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officers' billet during the days of the occupation. They must have liked him there. He was intelligent and he could be charming. He knew a great deal about American jazz and played a pretty good set of drums himself. When he liked something he said it was real cool, or George, or right down the middle. He had given Chiisato a fifty-dollar brocaded *obi* for New Year, and he had been drunk at the house that night, crying because she was so good and because he was such a disgrace to their dead father. In the morning he had gone to the shrine with his hang-over.

"Nobody's going to get hurt, Rentaro," said Carl.

"So. You go away, nobody is hurt."

"You're coming down, and we're going to take a walk together."

Rentaro stared for a moment, then said, "I have gun, Carl."

"You won't use it."

"Yes. I will use."

"Thought you liked a knife. It was a knife last night."

"I have gun. I will use."

"Leave the gun up there."

"No."

"Better do that, Rentaro. Better do it that way for Chiisato."

Rentaro's cheek muscles pulled at his lips suddenly. "Chiisato! She — she told you this place?"

"No, she didn't tell me. I found it myself. But she knows I'm here."

"She knows? *Wakara-nai* —"

"If you listen to me, you'll understand. She says she's going home if I take you in."

"So." Rentaro nodded, understanding that.

"But we're happy together, Rentaro — you know that, don't you? *She's* happy. You don't want to break that for her, do you?"

"Cannot help this."

"Yes, you can! If you give yourself up, that's different. That means I didn't take you in. It's your own action, and then I'm not responsible. That's the way she would see it."

Rentaro cocked his head and it took a few moments for him to put these ideas together in it. Then he shook his head abruptly and said, "No!"

"I don't want to come after you," said Carl. "I don't want to do it that way."

Rentaro slammed the window shut.

Carl ran forward, into the bar. There was no time now to put this to thought. Maybe, at that, it was easier not to think about it because Rentaro was Japanese, and from the beginning Carl knew he would never understand completely all that drove the Japanese, and so he didn't try. With an American hood he might have wasted time trying to work out motives. Of course a cop shouldn't waste time on that kind of nonsense, anyway, because many a good cop had been killed while trying to figure out a man's motives; but Carl had always suspected he wasn't a very good cop in the first place. They had sent him to school and made an M.P. out of him, and later, when he showed investigative talent, they had trained him further and put him into the

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civilian clothes of the C.I.D. On the record he was a good cop, because you couldn't put a man's deeper feelings on the record. He tried to cut off all feeling now — he tried to be numb.

In the bar the round-faced girl in the pink kimono stared and cowered, and he ran past her and went directly to the narrow, polished stairs. He mounted them halfway. Rentaro appeared at the top, pointing a pistol.

Carl stopped. "I don't have a gun, Rentaro. You know we don't carry them."

"You go. You go away," Rentaro said.

All right, how do you answer a man with a gun? There is a handy cliché: *You wouldn't shoot a man in cold blood, would you?* But that only has meaning for you; there is no image for cold blood in Rentaro's language. You must face something. There *is* a difference. There always has been, even between you and Chiisato, even when you are mingling in love, even when parts of you are part of each other. Still — *something* is the same. There is a common denominator, if only you can find it —

"Listen, Rentaro. You're going to shoot that gun in a minute. I know it and you know it. But I don't care."

"Go!" Rentaro's voice was rising.

"I don't care. You know what that means? Do you know what death is? Do you know what it means when you don't care about it?"

"Last time I tell you. *Go away!*"

Now came the thoughts he couldn't put into words fast enough, the helpless ideas, dangling in his mind: he had wanted to live before, to be a little closer to Chiisato every day . . . she throws away a little of herself every day, I do the same . . . that's love, Rentaro, that's how a man and woman love. But it's got to be that way everywhere, not just between one man and one woman. All the people who don't understand each other have got to throw away a little of themselves — or else, sooner or later, kill. Kill each other, Rentaro — nobody lives. When you shoot we both die . . . everybody dies. How do you want it, Rentaro?

All Carl said aloud was: "It's your move."

Rentaro pulled the trigger. Carl heard a great explosion, but it was not like most explosions, for it was chopped off an instant later and he heard no echo. He felt a blow. It was like being struck in the chest with a heavy log, but there was no pain. There was a sudden daze, not quite black, but gray and unstable. He knew that he grabbed at the wall for support, but there was a lag between doing it and knowing it. He was out of phase with himself.

Somebody was moving — moving forward. He was. Up the stairs, toward Rentaro. Rentaro dropped the pistol and at first Carl thought he was laughing again, but after a while it sounded like crying.

Later he was downstairs in the bar, stretched out on a mat, and they were all around and above him. He re-

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membered being carried there. He had never really been unconscious. The wound in his chest, or shoulder, or wherever it was, hurt like the very devil now, the pain seeped away from the focal point and made his entire torso ache.

Chiisato stroked his head. (He seemed to remember her getting here — but he wasn't sure how long ago.) Chiisato. Her fingers knew some magic; whenever he came home tired, she massaged him like this.

He saw Rossiter standing beyond Chiisato, his narrow face grave, almost compassionate. "We got a doc coming."

"Karru-chyan," said Chiisato.

He couldn't speak because his throat was dry, but he nodded.

"Rentaro-san apologize. His is sorry."

It was so absurd that he had to smile. But Chiisato was serious. Rentaro was of her family; his guilt was hers — that was one of the things he would never understand completely. Then it came to him that if Rentaro had spoken to her he must have given himself up. And since Chiisato was here she had come back on her own — she must have thrown away something of herself to come back to him.

So there *was* a common denominator. His people and her people had tried to say there wasn't — but they were wrong.

"I . . . love . . . you," he tried to say to Chiisato.

"*Nani?* What?" She was particularly lovely when she was puzzled; she dipped her head to one side like a geisha of Kyoto being at once wise and innocent.

He had no strength to speak again. That was all right. He would tell her later. There would be time, plenty of time.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **THOMAS WALSH**

TITLE: ***"I Killed John Harrington"***

TYPE: Human Interest Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Powell

COMMENTS: *What is a murderer's conscience? A "thing in him that was soundless and alive, that moved under his thoughts . . . as formless as fog." And what is a detective's conscience? The conviction that loan sharks are not human . . .*

IT WAS RAINING AS WALTER CAME out of the bank — a soft spring rain that darkened the pavement before the steps and made a fuzzy golden glow of the tall street lamp at the corner. Falling on his face it was cool, immeasurably cool, the touch of it delicate and calm on his cheeks, soothing and quiet to his mind. He lifted his pale sharp face gratefully against it, going up Ellinton Street as the voices of young Kennelly and Joe Watts began to sound in the passage behind him, and pretending that he did not hear when Ally Harding shouted something after him about a car — why didn't he come along with them?

Silently and quickly he went up Ellinton Street, past the group in the doorway of the Five-and-Ten that, protected by umbrellas and the glistening dark shine of raincoats, waited there for the bus. After two blocks he came to the boulevard, where it was darker, colder, rainier, with the high buildings gone, and the open wind-swept space of the river on his right. Cars and buses went by fast with a slithery hiss of tires on the wet roadway; his bus, Number Four, rumbled by before he had gone a hundred yards.

It was, at half-past 5, stuffed with people, with folded newspapers, with faces and hats and extended arms swinging on the straps. He should have been in it, Walter thought; standing there by the fat man, holding onto his strap. And for a moment, as he looked into it, it seemed that he was there, swaying by the fat man,

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and the fascination, the compulsion, the curious urging tremor that had moved in him all day was strong again — a force that grew and grew until he did not dare to breathe for fear that breath would burst it.

He shivered, not from cold, for his face was hot again under the rain, but because of what might have happened if he had taken the bus. He could picture it clearly; he could feel the thing burst in him, and the flow of words swept from his lips. Listen, he might have said, touching the fat man's arm, and waiting until the fat man's face turned to him. You're reading about Louie Marion; you're learning how and when they're going to execute him tonight, because he killed John Harrington — because they think he killed John Harrington. Aren't you? But he didn't really kill him. I did, he could have told the fat man. I did. I killed John Harrington.

I killed him because he caught me, because he switched on the light and when I turned he was sitting at his desk, holding his gun, and I had to fire before he could. I didn't mean to kill him. I thought the gun would scare him — that's why I brought it. But when the lights came on and I saw him I fired before I thought, my finger moved before I told it to. Still I killed him; he fell across the desk on his face, and I ran out and across the lawn and got away. No one saw me. But I killed him.

"Why" — the fat man might have said. And, frightened, he'd have tried to get away. And then Walter could have shouted it out to all of them, to all the faces, to all the astounded eyes, with the thing in him burst now, and irresistible. The guy's Walter Robinson, a voice might have said. I know him — sure. He lives on Shepherd Avenue and he's got a cute wife and a couple of kids. Maybe he's nuts. Maybe,— call a cop, buddy. Stop here. There's one. Hey! Hey! This guy —

Walter went on, through the rain. A fool would have taken the bus; but he wasn't a fool. He knew that all he had to do was keep away from people, stay by himself, and it would be all right. In five hours it would be all over; in five hours Louie Marion would be dead. For five hours he'd have to be very careful; he'd have to fight the thing in him that was soundless and alive, that moved under his thoughts, always, always, as formless as fog, more substantial than light. But he could beat it, Walter thought; he had to beat it. He knew what it was.

Once in a book — a Russian book — he'd read about it. There was a man who had committed a crime, who could never forget it, though no one knew about it; he thought of it all the time until one day, on the street, before a crowd of strangers, he'd got down on his knees and put his face against the earth and shouted out the thing he'd done. It had been fantastic. A man doing that! Yet, Walter thought, it's true. He could see it now. It was the crowd that did it, the people that didn't know, the

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people that must know. If the Russian had been clever, he'd have stayed by himself. Then, Walter thought, he could have beaten it. In five hours Louie Marion would be dead; between eleven and twelve, the papers said, he'd go to the chair. No one would know. They'd forget Louie Marion, as they'd forget John Harrington. And he'd be safe. He'd be safe until he died.

He wasn't a fool. He'd keep quiet. He'd — It faintly surprised him to find himself in Shepherd Avenue, before his house. Mechanically he climbed the steps and went inside. The clock on the living-room mantel showed him it was twenty to seven. Mechanically he looked at it, and added five hours to it in his mind. He wasn't a fool. No one, not even Eleanor —

The thought seemed to stop in him, frozen, while he walked into the kitchen, and said: "Hello, there," and hit young Walter on the head with his rolled-up evening paper. He couldn't kiss Eleanor because she was bent over the oven, basting the roast, so he said, cheerfully and loudly, "Raining out. That smells good," and touched her elbow for a moment. When he had washed his hands and removed his coat the meal was ready, and all he had to do was sit down, with the paper propped before him, and his head bent over it as if he were reading.

While Eleanor served and poured young Walter's milk, she told him what a day it had been. Young Walter was an imp; and the baby had been cranky all afternoon. For a while then, as they ate, she was quiet, though all the time Walter could feel her eyes studying him.

"What is it?" she asked, after he had forced down his last bit of potato and pushed back his chair. "What's wrong, Walter? Why are you looking so queer?"

"Silly," Walter said. He bent over and kissed the back of her neck, and again, suddenly and without warning, the thing in his mind quivered, pressing and enormous. He could tell her now; he could say, "Eleanor, I killed John Harrington." Without effort, those few words — and she would know. "Eleanor, listen —"

"Don't go imagining things," he said, with a painful breath. "Don't be childish."

Her eyes were worried and anxious. "But, Walter —"

He went into the living room. She would have been frightened, too, he thought, like the fat man. White, terrified, she'd have drawn away from him in the first reflex of horror, of involuntary revulsion. Even Eleanor —

He mustn't tell her. He knew that. Keep to himself, alone, in a spot where no one would hear him if he shouted it out. All he had to do was walk and walk, in quiet streets, in the rain. In five hours it would all be over. No one knew. After tonight no one would ever know.

Very quietly he took his hat from the peg in the hall and slipped out

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through the front door. Half an hour later, in a little shop on North Avenue he stopped for some cigarettes and then went on again, downtown, passing Lothrop Street, and Rayner, and Clinton, coming then to the row of tall gray apartment houses, with the little park before them, and McLean Place on the other side of that, dark, quiet, peaceful. All he had to do was walk through the park, not turning into McLean Place when the paths crossed, not standing as he often had under the big oak, and staring at the third house down, on the left.

He wouldn't do that tonight. He'd go past it to the river, to the benches that would be deserted tonight, even by lovers, to the darkness where he would be alone. And still when he didn't do that, when he turned without hesitation and took the left-hand path, going past the oak to McLean Place, and walking along the pavement there until he was outside the third house down, he felt no surprise. It was all right, he thought; he wasn't going to go in. Anyone could stop here to look at the house. That wasn't a crime. A crank could even go up the small stoop, the way he was doing now, ringing the bell at the top, and asking the maid if Mr. Worth was home. He hadn't told; he hadn't said a word; he could slip out now, with the maid gone, vanished in the dim hall, and no one left to watch him. Or he could even stay, as he was doing, and wait for Martin Worth. Even yet there was nothing definite, nothing that could not be changed, taken back. He wasn't a fool, Walter thought; he wasn't going to —

Martin Worth, the State's Attorney, was a heavy-set man past forty, rather bald, with dark, sharp eyes and a masterful mouth. Opening a door on the right, showing Walter in before him with a brief smile and a nod of his head, he switched on the lights, took a cigar from his lips, and closed the door behind him.

"I'm Worth," he said. "You wanted to see me?"

Walter nodded. When he spoke his voice was a little loud, but not shaky at all. It seemed to come out of him with a strength of its own.

"It's about Louie Marion," he said.

Deep lines tightened infinitesimally around the other man's mouth "Sorry," he said curtly. "Your coming here was useless, of course. There's nothing I can do. Only the governor can help him now. He'll be executed in three hours, man. You're a relative?"

Now that he was about to speak, the pressure, the urging that had drawn at his mind in the bank, was completely gone. He knew he could stop; but, oddly, he didn't want to.

"No." He shook his head again. "I killed John Harrington."

Martin Worth stared at him, his lips gaping in a stupid "O" around the end of the cigar.

"Indeed!" he said, recovering himself after a moment. "Indeed! Ah —" The sharp eyes passed over Walter;

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the deep voice became very calm and soothing. "Just sit here for a moment, young man. If you'll excuse me —"

Martin Worth was familiar with cranks; his manner was perfect and unalarmed. He was almost out in the hall before Walter realized what he was going to do.

"Give me a moment," Walter said, without raising his voice, so quietly that Martin Worth turned around and stared at him with perplexed dark eyes. "I'm assistant cashier at the Third National Bank — maybe you remember seeing me there, Mr. Worth, when you come in to see Mr. Quarrier. I'm just outside his office, at the desk by the gate. You came in to see him a week ago — last Tuesday."

Something that might have been recognition showed in the other man's face. Walter went on, levelly and without emotion, as he saw it.

"Over two years ago I got in a jam. Someone I knew gave me a tip on the market, and I thought if I had a thousand dollars I could make two or three. Only I didn't have a thousand dollars. The bank had. I took it. In a week, when the stock went up, I thought I could pay it back. Then the stock went down. In a week I didn't have a dollar."

"Here," Worth said, quiet and sharp. "What are you talking about?"

Very easily, without any hesitation, the words came from Walter. He had been framing them in his mind, he thought, for eight months.

"That put me in a spot, Mr. Worth. I had to get that thousand dollars. I went to the one man who might let me have it — John Harrington."

"You knew he was a loan shark?"

"I'd heard talk. I told him if he gave me the money I'd pay him twenty-five dollars a week until it was all returned, and I signed a paper that I thought said that. When he gave me the cash I put it back, and then every week I paid him twenty-five dollars. For a year and a half — almost two thousand dollars."

Looking at him uncertainly, Worth said nothing. Walter went on.

"I thought that was enough, but he said it wasn't; he said the twenty-five dollars was just the weekly interest rate I'd agreed to pay. He said I hadn't even touched the principal yet, and that if I didn't keep on paying he'd tell the bank. I knew they'd fire me, and I knew I couldn't pay him any more than twenty-five dollars a week. The way it was I told my wife I'd been cut, and went without lunches and cigarettes. Then I thought I'd steal the paper I signed, so that he wouldn't have any proof, and the bank wouldn't believe him. They liked me there. If he couldn't show the paper, I thought he mightn't even come down. No one else knew what I'd done.

"A couple of nights later I went out to his house on Appleton Road to steal it. I brought a gun with me although I didn't mean to hurt him. I thought just showing it to him if he caught me would scare him. He —"

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"You remember that night?" Worth asked suddenly, leaning forward. "Not the date — the weather?"

As he answered it Walter thought that the question would have trapped a crank. The date a man could find in the paper. The weather he wasn't likely to bother looking up.

"It was raining. A thunderstorm. When I got off the bus at Appleton Road all the street lights were off. The storm must have knocked down a wire."

Now under the level words that night shaped up again, slowly and vividly, with a kind of stark, unmoving preciseness — a picture forming and growing clear on some inner part of his brain so that once more he was in the darkness of that ninth of October, in that great windy blackness beaten through and drumming with the sound of raindrops on the earth. There were no lights in the house. It was past twelve, the road was deserted; he stood again under the trees; he felt again the cold, desperate urging that had allowed him to stop only for a moment, and then drove him forward, across the lawn, through the darkness that was a friend and cold terror.

There was no sound but the rain. No one challenged him. He found a cellar window whose rotten wood snapped under the pressure of his knife blade. He crawled inside. His voice was low now, dry and husky. It seemed to follow and no longer precede the phantom resurrected actions in his mind.

"I got upstairs, into his offices. There I snapped the lock off his files with a chisel I'd brought with me. It took me a couple of minutes to find the paper I'd signed and the notes of the payments I'd made — everything that had my name on it. Just as I had them in my pocket and was turning to get up, the lights went on. He must have heard the noise I made forcing the lock. I saw him behind the desk with a gun in his hand and I fired before he could fire at me. Before he even said anything. Before I meant to. As soon as the light went on I must have pulled the trigger. He fell across the desk, on his face."

Staring at him, quiet and purposive, Martin Worth said: "The lock was broken on his files. That's true. We never did find out why Louie Marion —" Watching Walter carefully, he reached behind him for the phone.

Walter did not listen to what he said. He felt a vast disinterest in Martin Worth, as if the stocky man were not at all important; part of him, confounding time and reality, was kneeling before a file on one knee, watching the top of a man's head that swung a little, humorously, on a gray blotter, and then got quite still. Part of him smelled the strong smoke confined in a quiet room, thin and gray and almost motionless. And part of him, too, must have answered the questions that Martin Worth shot out at him, as soon as he put down the phone. Then perhaps ten minutes later the doorbell rang, and Worth opened the door to the hall.

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"Show him in here, Mary," he said. "It's you, Powell?"

A tall thin man came in, took off a shabby felt hat, and looked down at Walter with light eyes that were tired and quiet and extraordinarily calm, as if nothing could ever surprise them very much. For a minute or two Worth talked to him, keeping tight hold of his arm; then he turned, and the cigar was jabbed suddenly at Walter.

"All right. Tell your story."

Walter told it. The thin man, silent, leaned against the desk and considered Walter gravely, with an air of taking his tone, his expression, his features, and weighing them quietly and slowly. He asked no questions until Walter had finished; then he said mildly: "How was he dressed? This Harrington?"

In the instant before he fell forward, dead across the desk, John Harrington looked at Walter again, faintly surprised, his mouth slightly open, his brows raised.

"A bathrobe," Walter said dully. "A dark one, red or brown. He had on a shirt inside it. No tie."

All the time, watching them, Worth had been puffing the cigar savagely, yanking it out of his mouth as if he were going to speak, putting it on the ashtray, picking it up again.

"Now listen," he said, before Powell could speak again. "You see the spot this puts me in? You see that? Say it's a put-up job — say he's a friend of Louie Marion's — and I stop the execution. Then I'm a fool — I'm the county's A-One sucker. I'm all washed up. The papers will never stop kidding me. And if it's true, if it really —"

The cigar performed incredible gestures of perplexed and angry bewilderment.

"You worked on the case — you were one of the men that found him the next morning, when his clerk couldn't get in. You ought to know whether he's lying. If it's true why didn't he tell us all this before? Why does he wait until the last night, until — my God! — there's only three hours left?"

"Why didn't you?" Powell asked, looking at Walter.

"Because I thought he'd be released, or reprieved. I knew he was innocent — I was sure they'd acquit him. When they gave him the chair I thought the governor would commute his sentence." Walter pressed his palms tightly against his temples. Something ached in his head, dreadfully. "I had a wife and kids to look out for. This Louie Marion was a gangster. I told myself he deserved it — that he'd probably killed a man, or more than one, in his life. The last couple of weeks I just thought I'd let him take it. No one knew and I thought I could do that. Even tonight I meant to do it. But I couldn't — I don't know why."

For a moment the thin man looked at Walter thoughtfully, and then he nodded and pushed away from the desk.

"Well?" Martin Worth's head came

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down and forward between his shoulders, questioning and aggressive. "You've got his story now. You ought to know —"

"Maybe I ought to," Powell said, blinking his tired eyes carefully. "Only I don't, Mr. Worth. If you ask me whether he's lying, I'd say no. It doesn't look like an eleventh-hour stall. I'd say he was telling the truth. The funny part is that I still think Louie Marion did the job."

"So he's right and he's wrong," Worth said, dangerously quiet. "That's your answer?"

Without seeming to feel the danger, rather meditatively Powell swung his hat around on his index finger and stared at it.

"I'm a cop, Mr. Worth — I ain't a magician." The tired eyes lifted to the other's face and stayed there for a while. "If you want me to make up your mind for you, you're asking for something I can't do. I'd suggest something if you wouldn't think it was screwy. I'd suggest getting in your car and going out to Appleton Road and having this Robinson show us what he did. If something's phony that's the place to spot it — right where it happened. Harrington's brother's out west somewhere, sick; he didn't even get here for the funeral. So nothing's changed. Everything's the way it was the night Harrington got rubbed out. If you think that's too screwy —"

"Nothing," Martin Worth said bitterly, "is too screwy in a spot like this. Come on."

He drove very fast. In ten minutes they were in Appleton Road, and Worth, in the dimly lighted hallway, was shouldering the caretaker brusquely out of the way.

"If you've been here before," he said, "you'll know the way this hall is furnished. Describe it."

Walter didn't have to make an effort to remember. It was very clear in his mind — the strip of carpet, the one chair, the little table, the long narrow picture of the Battle of Gettysburg over it. He led them down the hall then, and before the closed door of the office he told them where the files were, and the desk, with the bronze ashtray, made of two outstretched palms, on the blotter atop that, just right of the inkwell.

In the office, after they had looked at the mark his chisel had made on the drawer of the filing cabinet, Martin Worth said softly, "I guess that's it. He couldn't get all that out of the papers, Powell. I'm calling the governor. It's nine thirty now."

Looking vaguely dissatisfied, Powell nodded; he kept one thumb under his chin and nibbled on the knuckle of a forefinger. Walter sat before him, quietly, with his head in his hands. It was over now; it was queer that he felt nothing, neither exultation nor despair. He wasn't glad that he had saved Louie Marion; nor was he sorry. Why had he done it? *Why?*

Even now the answer was unclear. The choice had stood apart, detached from emotion, in his mind — what

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was it, after all, but the choice of Eleanor and the kids, or a man like Louie Marion? Which of them were to be saved? It had simmered down to that; truth or justice or mercy or conscience were obscure words, scarcely understood. They had nothing to do with it. He wouldn't tell. A thug like Louie Marion! And Eleanor. . . .

"Then get him, damn it," Worth shouted into the phone. "And get him before ten o'clock. Phone me here as soon as you locate him. I'll be waiting. It's new evidence, man. If I don't get your call in fifteen minutes I'll phone the warden myself. I'll have to."

Hanging up, "A dinner party," he said bitterly to Powell. "And the secretary didn't know whether he should be disturbed."

"Uh-huh," Powell answered, with an absent nod, staring down at Walter as if he didn't see him, as if his thoughts were inward, searching for something else. "This Louie Marion," he said, after a pause. "What did you think of his story? How did you feel about him, Mr. Worth?"

"The way everyone else felt. I'll never be as certain of anything again. Guilty."

"Guilty," Powell said, plucking a bit of thread from his coat sleeve and rolling it about between his fingers with a small, preoccupied frown, "guilty as hell. It was all practically perfect. There's a cop that ducks in a doorway down the street when it begins to rain that night. He sees Louie Marion come out of this house and get into his gray coupé. Then there's a guy parked with his girl on the river drive, and he sees this same gray coupé pull up near him and a guy get out and throw a gun into the river. The guy he identified as Louie Marion. We know Louie wanted a cut on Harrington's loan-shark take; we know Harrington wouldn't give it to him. All that is like these new screws they have out — the more stress you put on them, the tighter they grip."

"Twenty to ten," Martin Worth said, looking at his watch. "I'm giving him till the hour. No more! What are you talking about now?"

"Louie Marion," said Powell, looking sad and meditative and a little angry. "Being as long on Homicide as I have you get feelings about things, about people. You know that, Mr. Worth. Your office and ours work the same way; talk to everybody involved until one of the stories kind of twists around inside you. Why? Well, I couldn't tell you that. An intuition, you could call it, or a hunch. You just know, see? Proof's another matter. Proof's what we work for after we get a line on where to start. Even the cases that never get to a jury aren't as tough as the papers make out; we know who did the job even when we can't dig up proof enough to take him into court. The first time I heard this Louie Marion's story I said that's the guy. I just knew it, understand. He checked all the way down the line."

Pausing there, he regarded Walter for a long moment.

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"Get up," he said finally, nibbling on his finger again. "Go over to the door. Say we ain't here. You're alone, like that night, understand. You do just what you did then."

Martin Worth gave an impatient little chirk of the lips.

"Go ahead," he said, with a heavy note of irony. "Let's reconstruct a crime eight months old. Let's find out what really happened."

"Why not?" Powell gazed at him placidly. "The room ain't been touched, Mr. Worth. Say it's curiosity; say it's the feeling we both had about this Louie Marion. Say it's that hunch I was just talking about. Go on," he told Walter. "With everything the same, understand. Everything."

Rising stiffly, Walter got up and went over to the door, stopping there with his back behind it. There was something that wasn't the same, he thought; for a moment he couldn't remember what it was.

"The lights," he said then. "They were off. I had a flashlight."

There were three lamps in the room, all lit. The one near the window and the one over the easy chair, Powell snapped off by walking across to them and clicking their buttons; only the small outspreading cone of the desk lamp was left on when he nodded to Walter to start.

Inside him as he started to cross the suddenly quiet room Walter felt his heart begin to beat so fast and hard that it was difficult for him to breathe. Martin Worth's bald head made a white blob in the shadow; behind the desk Powell's thin body was almost invisible. Neither of them spoke; only his feet on the rug scuffled forth a small sound to break the silence.

He reached the files and knelt before them, and as he turned he saw Powell bend forward slightly, into the light of the desk lamp.

"You opened that drawer," Powell said. "The second one from the top. Now it takes you a minute to look through it. Now you pick out your papers. Now —"

The desk lamp vanished in a rush of darkness that was as swift and violent as a blow.

"The hell!" Martin Worth sounded panicky. "What are you doing? Put on that light!"

"Half a minute," Powell said. Nothing's going to happen, Mr. Worth. You're looking through that drawer now, Robinson. You're hunting for your papers. You can't find them right away."

On one knee, rigid, Walter crouched by the files. When Powell stopped speaking, when the deep silence spread out smoothly and without a ripple through the deep blackness, it seemed that nothing had changed. Time flowed back; it was a night in October. In a moment John Harrington would turn on the lights.

And then the lamp came on — the one light on the desk, throwing sharply through black shadow its downthrust yellow funnel of vision. The chair behind it, incredibly, was empty.

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It took Walter a moment to speak, in a husky tone he had to push physically from his dry throat.

"That's all. As soon as the lights came on I swung around and saw him. I fired before I thought. That's how it happened."

Rubbing his two thumbs, very gently, out over his brows, Powell looked down at Walter and said nothing. He shouldn't have been hopeful, Walter thought; this had all been insane from the beginning. Powell could doubt it, if he wanted to; but a man could not forget what his own eyes had seen, what his own hands had done.

It might have happened again tonight, in that moment of darkness. He fired and John Harrington fell, and in the long narrow mirror on the wall behind him Walter could remember how his knee had been reflected, with his hand resting on it, holding his gun that had very lazy, very gray smoke curling upward from the barrel. Mechanically now his eyes moved upward to see that again, but in the shadow behind the desk he saw only the vague impression of Powell's long face floating as if disembodied above the empty chair.

"The lights," he said dully. "They were all on. Not only that one on the desk. I could see the mirror behind you."

"They couldn't have been on," Powell said, and his eyes, with an instant's gleam in them, moved across to Martin Worth. "Anybody sitting at this desk could only turn on the desk lamp. The others work from the switch by the door. Watch."

Moving quickly, he went across to the switch by the door and snapped the button in. Darkness fell, complete and savage. Then his hand must have moved again, for they came on in an instant, all three lamps. There was no shadow behind the desk. Walter saw the mirror.

He said huskily, "That's how they were."

Powell's voice had a patient, slow exasperation in it: "They couldn't be. If the wall switch was on, all the lamps are on. You can turn them off by touching their buttons, but they'll only come on again, all at once, if this switch is turned on again. Nobody sitting at that desk could turn them on all at once. You see that, Mr. Worth?"

"I see it's five to ten," Martin Worth growled. "I'm calling the warden. Maybe he'll listen to me. And what's the good of this? What do you think you're doing? This man confessed without any pressure. We didn't ask him to. He could be frightened enough now to start lying. Or it's a detail he might have forgotten. It can't change things."

"Don't call the warden," Powell said. It was quiet, and it was an order, so that Worth gaped up at him in blank-faced surprise. "Remember the cop's story, Mr. Worth — the one that saw Louie Marion come out of here and get into his coupé? That cop said it was just beginning to rain then — he'd stepped into a doorway probably hoping it wouldn't keep

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up. Robinson here said he got off the bus when the storm was at its height — that puts him here *after* Louie Marion. See that? He said it was a bad thunderstorm and the street lights —"

He stopped there. "They were off," he continued, after a moment. "Ain't it obvious why, Mr. Worth? A line was knocked down somewhere in the storm; I remember the electric clock in my kitchen was half an hour slow the next morning. Current in this part of town was off half an hour, then. That's why the house was dark when Robinson came in; and that's why the lights came on all at once while Harrington was sitting at his desk. He didn't touch the switch. He couldn't, and get back to the desk while Robinson turned around. Those lights came on naturally when current was restored. See that?"

"Absurd!" Martin Worth said, but there was an uncertain expression in his eyes. "Then you have John Harrington sitting here in the dark, watching a man jimmy open his files and take out his papers — you have him sitting there ten minutes maybe with a gun in his hand, watching all that, and not saying a word. Why?"

In a soft voice, as if he were talking to himself, Powell said: "Because he's dead. Because Louie Marion knocked him off before the storm began, before he had a chance to use the gun he'd pulled, and left him sitting there. Then the lights go off and Robinson comes; and they go on and he's blinded a little and he sees Harrington and he's in a panic and he fires before he gets a good look at him and Harrington falls across the desk and Robinson runs out of here without even touching him. He's dead, sure — *only he was dead before Robinson fired at him!* He had to be."

It was so quiet in the room after he stopped speaking that Walter felt the silence in the beating of his own heart.

"What?" Martin Worth asked, in a dazed voice. "What?"

"He was dead sitting there," Powell said, not persuasively or with any effort at conviction — just as if he were stating a dry surety of fact. "A living man would have said something; one as yellow as Harrington would have plugged you without taking a chance, without turning on the lights, from the back. Kneeling there with a flashlight you were a perfect setup. The lights were the thing that fooled you, like they fooled me; when they came on you'd think a living man turned them on, and when you saw only Harrington in the room, sitting there, you'd figure he was the living man. All the time it was only the current being restored."

Martin Worth smashed a fist on the desk. "Maybe we're both crazy. We convict a man for a crime and he claims he's innocent. We don't believe him. A man comes to us and confesses and we don't believe *him!* You're trying to clear him now, Powell. And I'm crazy enough to believe you may be right. And just to make it perfect it's ten o'clock. One hour left!

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My Lord," he ended hopelessly, rubbing his face and staring at Walter. "You said Harrington fell forward across the desk after you fired. How did that happen — if he was already dead? There was only one bullet hole in his body."

Crossing to the files, Powell knelt down in front of them and faced the desk. Walter watched him, afraid to move or speak, an enormous iron hand seeming to take his body, shake it down its length, release it and grasp it again in time to the pounding in his chest that couldn't be his heart.

The empty desk chair, upholstered in leather, with deep wings on either side of it and the impression of a body still darkening the back between the wings, was ten feet from them.

"You fired," Powell said slowly. "Say you missed him. Then you had to hit the chair. You had to."

Very cold, rigid between the shakings of that enormous hand, Walter seemed able to move only his head, turning it slowly, with Powell, as the big man crossed the room, and unclasped a penknife when he reached the chair.

Swiftly, with a faint hissing sound, the blade cut through the leather covering the right wing. Strips of dirty gray cotton batting curled out in Powell's hand until the wooden support was revealed behind them. After a while he muttered something softly, straightened, and swiveled the chair around so that the other wing was before him.

Perspiration beaded his forehead as he bent above it. The knife slashed again. But no bullet would be there, Walter thought; and if it wasn't there it was nowhere, for there was no mark of its passage in the smooth leather stretched across the back. This was insane. He'd killed a man and nothing could change that. Nothing could —

The bullet was about six inches down from the top, imbedded deeply in the wooden support. When Powell had carved it free, very slowly and carefully, he balanced it for an instant in his palm before extending it to Martin Worth.

"Your gun," he asked Walter. "What was it?"

Walter stared up at him. A voice that didn't seem to move his frozen lips said thickly: "A thirty-eight. It's home. It's — the papers said a forty-one killed him; I know that. But I thought somebody had made a mistake — or that it was a trick, perhaps, that they suspected someone else had killed him and put that in as a trap. I never thought it meant I didn't kill him. Mr. Powell —"

But Powell was looking at Martin Worth. "A forty-one," he said, "did kill Harrington. This thirty-eight didn't even touch him. And Robinson wouldn't know — couldn't know — that this was a thirty-eight unless he fired it himself. You see that, Mr. Worth? He ain't been within ten feet of it since I dug it out. His thirty-eight didn't kill Harrington — it just lodged in here, between the wing of the chair and the back, in the crack there that just closed over it without

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leaving any mark. That's why we didn't find it before; that's why I knew tonight it had to be in that crack if it was any place. This thirty-eight only knocked the chair back. It's swiveled, Mr. Worth. See?"

With one hand he pressed the back away from him. As soon as he released it the seat tilted forward again and remained a moment swinging uneasily.

"The bullet knocked it back all the way, with enough impetus in the rebound to jerk it forward again. Harrington's dead weight toppled him across the desk. That's how he fell."

There was a funny, ringing emptiness in Walter's mind that told him all this was unbelievable, a dream; it hadn't really happened. Not even if Martin Worth was looking down at him and saying something in a puzzled tone about unlawful entry. Armed, too. That —

"You're figuring loan sharks are human," Powell said. "I never did, myself. Me, I'd remember this Robinson's got two kids and he needs his job. If I was a betting man I'd lay five to one he's going to turn green the next time he sees a stock market report in the paper."

Worth looked thoughtful. "You could be right. What on earth could I charge him with? You can't attempt murder on a dead man. Or can you, Powell?"

He frowned at Walter. Then the phone on the desk tinkled and he looked at that, but he didn't pick it up.

Then they were in the car again, and it stopped at the corner of Shepherd Avenue and Powell opened the door. Walter got out. He turned when he reached the pavement and looked at them. "Can I —" he began, in a shaky voice.

"Go home," Martin Worth said moodily. "Don't bother me again. What the devil can I tell the governor for busting up his dinner party? Have you any ideas, Powell?"

Sadly, with a great deal of effort, Powell managed to wink at Walter.

"I guess," he said, "I'm fresh out of them, Mr. Worth."

From the corner, after they had gone, Walter could see the lighted windows of his living room. He could think of Eleanor now; he knew she was waiting for him. He could run, too, through the dark quiet street, until he was at the steps, and up them, and opening the door.

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1 The Case of The TERRIFIED TYPIST

The Very Latest Perry Mason H

Perry Mason has an ace up l sleeve—a gorgeous red-head! Sh the surprise witness he's counting to save his client from the elect chair. But she DISAPPEARS. Per can't locate her. But when the tr opens she's *in the courtroom*. SHE going to be the star witness FO the D. A.!

2 The Case of The NERVOUS ACCOMPLICE

Mason's beautiful client, Syb Harlan, is on trial for murder. T District Attorney produces one wi ness after another—right down to ballistics expert who says that t fatal bullet came from Sybil's gu And all Perry offers in her defen is—*a wheelbarrow filled with rus* scrap iron!

3 The Case of The SUN BATHER'S DIARY

Perry gets a frantic phone call from a woman who says all h clothes and her auto trailer we stolen while she was sunbathin She offers Perry $1500 to recov them. The investigation leads Mas into a MURDER case. According the evidence, the killer is eith Perry's client . . . *or Perry himsel*

4 The Case of The GLAMOROUS GHOST

Perry's client has an nesia. She can't rememb a thing that happened the fateful night her hu band was murdered. Sh can't even recognize h own gun — the MURDE WEAPON!

5 The Case of The RESTLESS REDHEA

Perry Mason's client the victim of a doubl frame-up . . . or IS she The first time she calle up Steve Merrill, the polic came—and accused her stealing $40,000 in jewe from Merrill's wife. Th SECOND time she calle him, the police cam again. This time they ac cused her of MURDER ING Merrill!

6 The Case of The RUNAWAY CORPS!

Myrna Davenport hire Mason to get a letter whic accuses her of planning t poison her husband Ed (Ed has just died of arse nic poisoning!) Perr searches Ed's office an finds an envelope with s sheets of *blank* paper Then the police accus Perry of substituting th blanks for the REAL letter

—Continued on Inside Cove

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